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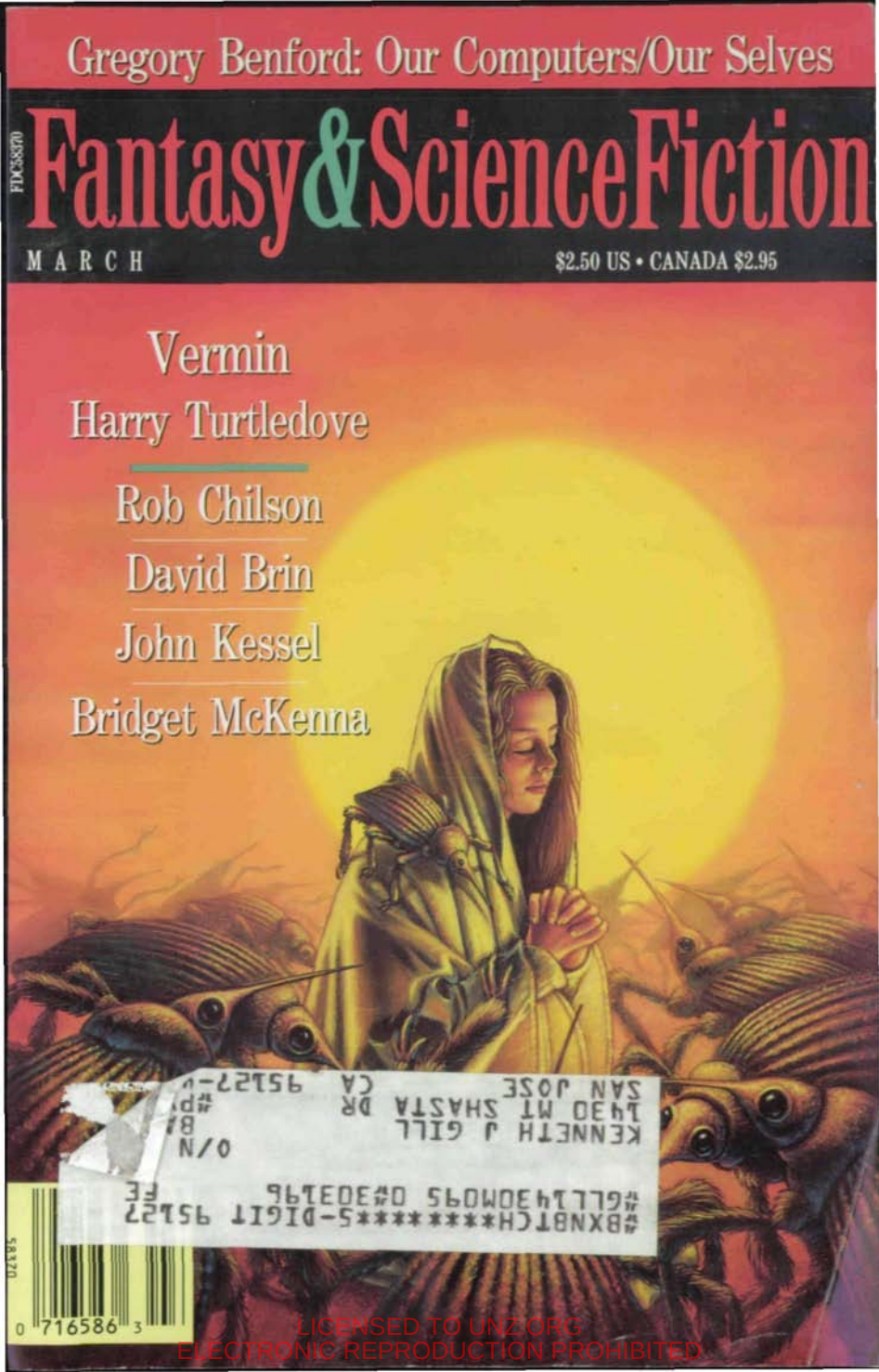

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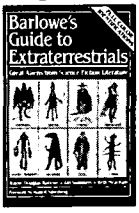

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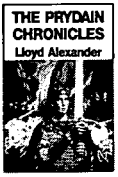

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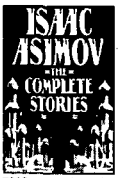

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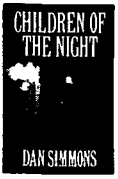

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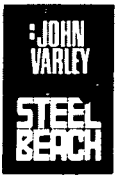

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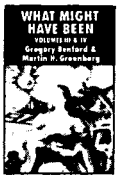

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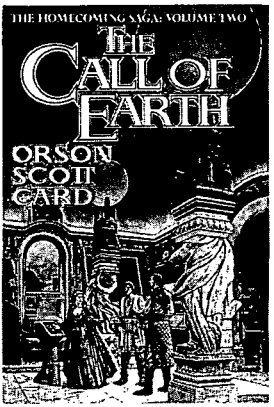

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE CHANGES continue.

In January, I promised that, within a few months, I would introduce you to our new book review columnist. At the time I wrote the editorial, I had asked John Kessel if he would like the position and he was in the process of making a decision.

Writing a book review column is not as easy as it seems. We all have opinions about the books we read, but opinions are not enough. A book reviewer must see how the books fit into both the genre and in literature. A reviewer must make that book sound interesting, at least for the length of the column. A reviewer must, first and foremost, be a good writer, and must have the ability to deliver to a preset deadline.

John has written reviews before — excellent reviews — for such publications as *Short Form, The New York Review of Science Fiction,* and *The Los Angeles Times Book Review.* He has a Ph.D in American Literature, and teaches that subject at North Carolina State University's English Department. He has written four novels and over thirty short stories, most of which appeared in sf publications. He won a Nebula in 1982.

He was certainly qualified. We both knew it.

What he had to consider was whether or not, between his teaching and his fiction writing, he had the time to read and analyze the books that crossed his desk.

He called me back, and said he couldn't write a column every month. Rather than lose his expertise, we reached a compromise. John's essays will appear every other month, along with short reviews by Orson Scott Card. Scott's columns will still appear every month, but he now has the option of occasionally writing a longer column, should a book warrant it, in the months that John's essays do not appear. I like this compromise. I think it will keep the magazine lively and unpredictable.

For those of you unfamiliar with John Kessel's writing, let me give

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you an expanded biography. John made his first science fiction sale to *Galileo* in 1978, and his first sale to *F&SF* in 1979. His Nebula winning novella, "Another Orphan," appeared in F&SF in 1982. His last appearance in these pages was with the award-winning story, "Buffalo," in January of 1991. His short fiction has also appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, New Dimensions, In the Field of Fire,* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction.*

He has published four books: *Freedom Beach,* written with James Patrick Kelly (Bluejay Books, 1985); *Another Orphan,* (TOR Books 1989); *Good News From Outer Space,* (TOR Books, 1989); and *Meeting in Infinity,* (Arkham House, 1992). He is working on another novel called *Corrupting Dr. Nice.*

John's first column appears a few pages ahead. It is all I hoped it could be and more. He continues our dialogues on fiction with a strong authoritative voice, adding his own unique perspective to the discussions of literature in our field.

Welcome aboard, John. I hope we continue our literary conversations for a very long time.

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Mark Bourne works for the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry's Sky Theater. He teaches astronomy, writes for astronomy magazines, and designs museum programs. He wrote Star Trek: Federation Science, *a nationally traveling interactive science exhibit, which, if you look closely enough, even mentions* F&SF. *In the midst of all this, he found time to attend the 1992 Clarion West Writers Workshop in Seattle, and write a few science fiction stories. "Brokedown" is Mark's first professional sale.*

Brokedown

By Mark Bourne

THAT OLD, OLD black guy in the next booth was eating his soup real slow. He gripped the spoon the way a child clasps a stick, all the fingers wrapped tight in a fist. Boone watched as the spoon slid just under the soup's brown skin like a doctor's scalpel. Then it slowly rose toward the mouth, pulling the arm up with it. The bald head crept forward like a turtle's. Those thick, craggy lips pulled together and puckered up in front of yellow teeth. With a long sucky-slurpy sound, the soup just sort of leaped through the old man's lips. Then the whole cycle would start again, just as it had ten times in the past half hour.

The man's eyes flashed up from the spoon and locked with Boone's. Their whites were the color of dirty water, the pupils black like space and as deep as time. Surrounding them was a terrain of lines, an ancient map etched into that weary, haunted face.

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Embarrassed at getting caught, Boone quickly shielded himself behind a battered paperback of *The Hound of the Baskervilles.* But like before, the words just lay on the page, no more alive than flyspecks. They had withered and died with everything else. With Emma. With himself.

He glanced around the diner that had become a necessary shelter these past four hours. Orange-upholstered booths were occupied by similarly mundane locals. Elderly couples and tired-looking single men spooned up the dinnertime special. Mr. Coffee gurgled on the scarred chrome countertop and slices of pie rode a Ferris wheel under glass. The Dr. Pepper clock read half past seven. Muted voices from the kitchen radio competed with the song on the jukebox, some twangy c&w shit lamenting the loss of a good woman. Fuck. Boone wondered if he could accidentally kick the box on his way to the john.

"Ready for some dinner, hon?" A woman in a grimy apron had appeared beside him. Forty-five, maybe fifty years old. Graying hair that had once been deep brown. Tall and narrow, she carried herself with sharp-edged energy. Boone decided she could be older than she looked, maybe pushing sixty. She looked down at him with her pen and her smile and her little white pad. Her blue plastic badge proclaimed MARY ALICE.

Boone scooted his cup toward her. "No thanks. Just more coffee."

"You gotta eat, hon. My club sandwich is the best you'll find anywhere."

"No. Thanks."

"How 'bout some pie, then? I got fresh apple and Double-Chocolate Surprise fresh from the fridge. I could put ice cream on the pie for you. No charge."

Boone concentrated on dabbing up cracker crumbs with an index finger. "Just coffee."

"Well, Eule Barker will be here real soon now. He runs the garage over by the highway. He'll get your truck fixed up real good. Maybe you'll want to stay over at the Starlight Motel tonight. LizBeth Cranshaw keeps her rooms real nice."

"Maybe." He'd planned to be at the "Y" in Little Rock by now.

"Eule's real good with motors and things. He'll fix y'up." She stuffed the ticket into her apron pocket. "This is on the house, now. Bein' brokedown's bad enough. That pie's fresh, remember. You just holler if you want any, hon." She moved to the old man and offered him more soup.

Brokedown, that's a good way to put it. Can you be emotionally

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brokedown? Would a mental oil change get him on the road again? Is there a Jiffy Lube for the soul? Laura had been his mental mechanic for so long, and acting had let him drain pollutants from his psychic radiator. Now he had neither.

Christ. Fucking self-indulgent martyr. Boone hated when metaphors got out of hand.

Through the window, he saw the neon sign flicker orange light onto his pickup's windshield. *The Ol' South Cafe — It's Goo Eating!* strobed and popped like a bottled thunderstorm. The sun had melted over the autumn Ozarks, and way out there where the access road met Highway 7, headlights sped north toward Eureka Springs or south toward Little Rock. They ignored Duvall, Arkansas, population 935. Boone would have, too, but the goddamn truck finally crapped out on the way down from St. Louis.

Mary Alice was back, coffee in her hand and motherly concern on her face. She filled Boone's cup, then dug a generous handful of Sweet 'n Low and packets of powdered creamer from an apron pocket. Boone dosed his coffee, stirring slowly. She smelled of burger grease and fried potatoes.

"Whatcha readin', hon?"

He turned the cover toward her.

She liked it. "Murder stories scare the daylights outta me." She noticed the two other paperbacks next to the chrome napkin dispenser. "Now, I always did like them magic and make-believe stories. Ain't that sump'm?" She grinned, placing the coffeepot on the table. "You hear about them flyin' saucers on the radio? Someone done gone and reported 'em to the state police down in Little Rock."

"No kidding," Boone said without enthusiasm.

"Shoot, they been seein' them things round here for so long you'd think folks'd get tard of hearin' about 'em. But every few years, some kid says he seen a Martian land in the woods, so the whole county gets all crazy for a spell. Then we got your ghost lights out by the graveyards. Shoot, we even got our own Bigfoot just up northahere. Call him Momo, for Missouri Monster. Now, ain't that just the silliest thing?"

Boone sipped his coffee, wishing she would go away.

"You read a lot," Mary Alice said. "Now that's just real good." She refilled his cup, then returned to the kitchen, the double doors flapping behind her.

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By 8:00, the dinner crowd had thinned out to two darts players, a young couple sitting on stools at the counter, and an elderly woman who looked like the classic retired schoolmarm. The old, old man was dipping saltines into his soup and chewing them real slow. His eyes seemed focused on something a million miles away. Hank Williams crooned on the jukebox. Holmes put five bullets into the Hound, just like he always did. Boone went to the men's room to unload the coffee, grateful for the kind of piss that leaves you feeling like you just slept for six hours.

Afterward, Mary Alice was waiting at his booth with a sandwich and a huge slice of apple pie covered in ice cream. It was on the house, she said, because she was fixing to close up and didn't like ending the day with lots of leftovers.

"I can't imagine what's keepin' Eule," she said. "I keep callin' his house, but he don't answer. Not at the garage, neither. Maybe he went huntin' today." She sounded doubtful.

At 9:00, Mary Alice turned the door sign around to *Sorry We're Closed.* One of the two darts players waved "good night" and left, jingling the bells over the glass door; the other darts player took a seat on one of the counter stools. Everyone said "bye-bye" to the young couple, who smiled and held hands on their way out.

"Ain't they cute together?" said the schoolmarm. "That Beyer boy's growed up like a weed. And Annie Laura's just as pretty as June flowers."

"Shame 'bout her pa, though," the darts player said.

"Yeah," said the woman. "Drank hisself right to the grave."

"Yeah."

The jukebox went whirr-click and stopped. Boone felt like he'd wandered into the wrong funeral. He rose to leave, pulling on his jacket and leaving a dime on the table.

Mary Alice called to him from behind the counter. "You goin' out to the Starlight? I can give you a ride. Or Billy can, he's goin' that way."

The darts player started digging for his car keys. "It's on my way home," he said.

"No thanks. I'll just —" He stopped. He had neither a plan nor money for a motel. Like that time outside Omaha. Damn it. "I've got my truck rigged into a camper, sort of. It'll be fine. I've done it before." It was going to be chilly tonight, and probably rain, and the truck was too cramped for luxuries such as comfort.

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Mary Alice set down her bottle of Spray-n-Wipe. "Nonsense, hon. I got a spare room upstairs with a cot and some blankets. You can stay there if you want. It ain't the Starlight, but it's better than sleepin' in a smelly ol' truck in the rain."

Boone saw the concern on the faces around him (except for the old man's) and felt genuinely, warmly touched. It was a feeling he had forgotten.

"O.K.," he said. "I'll, um, bring my things in."

"I'll put some more coffee on," Mary Alice said.

As Boone stepped out onto the asphalt parking lot, the orange neon buzzed once, twice, then went dark and silent. The air was cool, sweet with the scent of autumn, and charged with the promise of approaching rain. The dogwood and locust trees droned with a rhythmic chanting of insects and wind whispers.

"Scuse me," a voice said, and Boone jumped, startled. A middle-aged couple with a small child brushed past him and entered the diner, ignoring the *Sorry We're Closed* sign. Another pickup and an old Dodge Dart were pulling into the parking lot.

Boone pulled his duffel bag from the cab, then lowered the tailgate to get at the boxes in the pickup's bed. He grabbed the one labeled CHILDREN'S first. These had been Emma's favorites. The memory almost made him smile.

Car doors slammed. Shoes and boots crunched gravel on the asphalt. Bells jingled every time the diner door opened. *"Howdy!"* and *"Ain't seen you in a while"* and *"How ya been doin', you ol' fart!"* and *"Didja hear the radio"* drifted toward him on the breeze. He placed the duffel bag on the box and carried them toward the diner. Mary Alice was lowering the blinds, but he could see that many of the booths were occupied. The place was filling up fast. There hadn't been this many people in there all day. Feeling the first taps of rain, Boone wondered if he'd been invited to a Bible service or a Klan meeting.

THE ATTIC was dry and comfortable. An electric heater was waiting for him, glowing warm and red. After unpacking his duffel bag and placing his pillow on the cot, he noticed a bentwood rocker in the corner, facing the television. He sat in it, then pushed with his feet and gently rocked, going *rrum rrum rrum* on the

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floorboards. Laura had bought a rocker like it at a garage sale. Dreams had come alive in that chair, had soaked into the wood, been recorded in the grain. Mother Goose. Pooh. Dr. Seuss. Narnia. Alice and Oz. There was magic in hearing Laura read a story aloud, encouraged by the special sounds of Emma's happiness.

A sour taste rose in his throat. Just go to bed, he thought. Cozy with the familiar blanket of bitterness snug as a straitjacket.

TOK-tok-tok. The knock on the door was followed by Mary Alice's voice. "Hon?" she called. "We're all gettin' together downstairs. Maybe the radio will talk about them UFOs. You can come wait for Eule down here with us. There's fresh coffee."

Boone felt caught in the act of doing something distasteful. He held his breath without meaning to, and stood flustered while the moment dangled before him.

"Well, g'night," Mary Alice finally said. "Let us know if we get too rowdy. See you in the mornin'." Her footsteps faded down the stairs.

He could go down there and watch others have a good time. Or stick to his usual routine and hit the sack pissed off and remorseful. And aware of the self-indulgence, which made it worse.

A burst of laughter filtered through the floor.

Fuck it. He stood, swallowed the sourness, and walked down the stairs, through the kitchen, and into a roomful of strangers waiting for the UFOs. Hell, maybe Elvis would drop by.

Mary Alice smiled as he sat at his earlier booth. She brought him coffee with Sweet 'n Low and creamer. The old guy with the soup was gone, but his was the only vacant spot in the place. Fifteen or twenty people sat in booths or at the counter. A cross section of rural banality chatting over their coffee and beers.

Shit, I've walked into *Our Town.*

But the atmosphere wasn't the dreary dead air of small-town folks just sitting around in a diner. There was an electrical charge of excitement, or anticipation, as if they were all waiting for a parade to begin, or a bomb to explode.

"Where the hell's Eule?" shouted a fat guy in a plaid shirt and John Deere hat. "He shoulda been here by now!"

"He ain't never been this late before," someone added.

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"I went to his house. Ain't no one home 'cept the dog."

"*Maybe* he got a *call!*" Billy said loudly. "Maybe —" The chatter stopped and heads turned toward him. The radio said it was sixty-five degrees and cloudy.

"Maybe whut?" said the fat guy.

Billy flashed a glance at Boone, then shoved a forkful of tater tots into his mouth. "Nuthin'. Never mind."

Mary Alice piped up. "I want y'all to meet Mr. Boone. His truck broke down out on the highway this afternoon. It had just enough go to get him to the parkin' lot." Assorted voices said *Hi* and *Ain't that a shame* and *How y'doin'*. "I told him Eule could get him fixed up."

"Shit," said a small man at the counter. He was a lean lump of rumpled brown suit. "Eule couldn't fix a broken wheel on a red wagon."

The schoolmarm looked at him sternly. "Now, Claude. There ain't no call for that!"

"It's true." The man's voice was barely a whisper. "We all know it, Rita."

A white-haired man stood up, parrying the air with a butter knife. "Knew someone like that in the war." A groan drifted from somewhere in the crowd. The white head shot a glare at the offender. Even the radio got quiet.

"Our receiver got busted after a bad hit. This soldier was s'posed to fix it. But he went out for a solo reccy and never came back. That's when we knew the enemy was close by." He stared ahead, eyes open wide. Boone tried to imagine what invisible scene the man was viewing, but knew he never could. "They kept a-comin' and a-comin! From ever'where! The whole sky in every direction lit up like it was afire!" His eyes turned downward, and gravity seemed to pull his face into long folds. "Lost some good friends in that one." He sat, staring into his buttered biscuits.

"We've heard it all before," said Claude. He slurped his beer. "Give it a rest, willya?"

"Now, Claude," the schoolmarm — Rita — drawled.

Boone surprised himself by chiming in. "Which war was it?"

Claude twisted on his stool. "What the fuck difference does it make? They're all the same."

Jeez, sorry. Asshole.

Rita's teacup clinked against her saucer. With her pale hands and flower-pattern dress, she looked as delicate as old china. "Pete misses his

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friends." She looked at Boone. "Pete's a war hero, you know." Then at Claude. "I know I miss *my* friends." The ache of loss grayed her voice. A sympathetic resonance pressed against Boone's chest.

"I had these two little friends where I grew up," she said. "They was twins, two peas in a pod." She giggled at the memory. "Their mama used to let 'em come play at my home, and my mama would let me go to theirs. We'd play like we was grown-up, or we'd go to our special place and tell secrets. Those were the best times." She sipped her tea with a shaky hand. "Then they went away, just moved off real sudden. Maybe it was the war. I don't know. I never saw them again, but —"

"— *but I think about 'em every day*," Claude mocked acidly.

Boone looked for something to throw at the little prick.

Claude pounded his fist on the countertop. "For cryin' out loud, woman! Maybe they left 'cuz they was bored listening to your yap!"

The big guy with the John Deere hat stood up. "Claude! That's enough. I don't know what's up your ass tonight, but I know I can throw you outta here so fast you'll leave skid marks on the moon. Now look at whatcha done!" He pointed to Rita, who was crying into a pink handkerchief. Boone wondered if he could leave without anyone noticing.

The small man squirmed in his suit like it was trying to crawl off his back. "Sorry," he said softly, then his voice rose in intensity. "But shit, John, why do we gotta hear the same crap every time we get together?" Claude gestured around the diner. "Billy there's gonna tell us what a great athlete he was, before he got stuck pumpin' gas for tourists. Lou Ann there likes to travel, see different people and places. Well, where you gone lately, Lou Ann? I don't see no luggage by the door!"

Lou Ann — young and beautiful — turned away bitterly.

John took a step toward the counter. The tension in the room pulled Boone's skin tighter, like a crank turning in his spine.

Claude spun on his stool, pointing every which way. "Jeremy's a science whiz. Edith there is a *great artist*!" His voice dripped sarcasm. "John, tell us how you lost your family in a *terr*-ible accident that still gives you nightmares. Jesus! Why don't we at least make up some new ones, 'cuz these're gettin' stale! Like the fuckin' food around here!" He shoved his cup off the counter. It shattered at Mary Alice's feet, all porcelain shards and wet black streaks.

John's fist struck Claude's mouth like a champion shot put, sending

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Claude sprawling on his ass across the floor to collide with Boone's booth. A baggy bundle of roughly man-shaped brown suit lay at Boone's feet. Boone tensed, not knowing if he should lend a hand or run like hell. Throughout the diner, voices sprouted, multiplied, and blossomed in gasps and exclamations. "Oh, my!" Rita mewed.

John helped Claude to his feet. The smaller man leaned on Boone's table to steady himself. He shook his head woozily. "Shit," he said, so softly only Boone could hear it. He rubbed his mouth and groaned. *Christ,* thought Boone. *He's going to puke and bleed all over me.* Boone handed him a napkin to catch the blood, but when Claude looked up, there was no blood around his lips, not even a bruise or a loose tooth. The little fuck was tough. Claude staggered to the far end of the counter. He sat and shook his head. "Sorry," he said.

"Sall right," John replied, already at his booth and lighting a cigarette. "Me too."

Well, this is fun, Boone sighed.

"So Boone!" John gestured with the cigarette. "Where you headed, up or down?"

Boone shrugged, trying to look more casual than he felt. "Down. Little Rock."

"Mmm. You look like a city fella. What's waitin' for you down there?"

"Work, I hope."

"What sorta work you do?"

A large brick materialized in his stomach. "I'm — well, I used to be an actor. Taught school for a while. Right now, any job will do." He began tearing a napkin into little paper bits.

John nodded. "Mmm."

Rita raised her hand. "Do you do Shakespeare? I just love Shakespeare!"

Boone hesitated. When he finally spoke, the words came out quieter than he expected. "Some. I, um, was with a performing company in Miami." He coughed self-consciously. "I — we did Shakespeare in the park every year. Played Romeo one summer."

"Oh, do some Shakespeare for us, please!" Rita bounced in her booth and primly clapped her hands in delight.

A chorus of "Yeah!" and "Come on, do some!" rose with a smattering of encouraging applause. A familiar electric tingle arced across Boone's skin. An eager audience waiting for his performance. But it had been too long.

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That part of him was gone.

John spoke between puffs. "Sure, show us whatcha got!"

Damn it, I don't "got" anything anymore. "No. I don't think so."

"I think acting is so romantic," Rita cooed. She ran a hand through her thin hair. "I always wanted to be an actress."

"Yeah, right," Claude grunted. "A regular Bette Davis."

Mary Alice was refilling Boone's cup. "He reads a lot, too," she announced. "All kinds of things."

Come on, let's drop it, O.K.?

A little girl in a booth near the door waved her hand in the air. Seven years old. Could be eight. Blonde, shiny hair. Like a kid on a toilet-paper package. A smile that adults lose the ability to make. Emma's smile.

"Will *you* tell us a story?" she said. Her eyes were that same shade of blue.

The woman sitting with her leaned toward the girl. "Now, Rachel, don't be botherin' the nice man." She smiled at Boone apologetically. *Kids,* her body language said.

"That's all right," Boone replied, though he hadn't planned on saying it out loud. The little girl grinned back at him. Buried memories pushed themselves into his thoughts. The sound of rocking chairs, the smell of books and freshly washed pajamas. A little girl's laughter. The squeal of bald tires on a wet road, then the crunching collapse of metal like a can crushed in a big fist. The steering column pressing hard against his sternum. Glittering snowflakes of glass cutting into his cheeks. Rain on asphalt. The smell of gasoline. Ludicrous thoughts about what he was going to tell Laura. Reaching for Emma with an arm that felt broken. An empty passenger seat. A dense filigree of spiderweb cracks across the windshield. Streetlight playing off blonde hair under the dashboard. The pain that finally took him out before he could scream.

A tight band squeezed his chest, constricted his breathing.

"O.K.," he said, instantly frightened at the word. The band gripped tighter. He could still back out, not do this. But something stirred within him, trying to step into the light.

He stood in the aisle between his booth and the counter. Mary Alice clicked off the radio. Rita was leaning forward over her table, anticipation on her face. Claude sat up straight with clear-eyed intensity. Light danced in the little girl's eyes. His audience wrapped him in their attention.

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Boone wanted to give something back. But it hurt. Oh God, it hurt.

Old skills awakened, as if from a long, troubled slumber. He thought about the rocker upstairs, and of another he had left behind a lifetime ago.

"I've, um —" He stopped, cleared his throat, started again. "I lost someone, miss someone, too." For the first time in his life, Boone felt old. "This is for Emma," he said. He inhaled deeply, feeling the grip on his chest. "And for Laura, who decided our house just got too empty. I don't know where she is now."

He pulled a battered paperback from a jacket pocket. It was dog-eared and worn, with a cracked spine. It smelled, wonderfully, as a book should smell. He opened it carefully, then cleared his throat.

"Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it. 'What is the use of a book,' thought Alice, 'Without pictures or conversations?' —"

After a while, he came to Emma's favorite part. Without missing a word or interrupting the flow of his reading, he glanced up from the page. Throughout the diner, faces held the same enraptured delight Emma had always given him. He paused for a second, using silence for dramatic effect. He made eye contact with some of them. Rita blushed but smiled encouragingly. Big John nodded his approval, ignoring the cigarette that was a leaning tower of gray ash burning toward his fingers. Lou Ann closed her eyes dreamily, as though carried to another place by his words. Boone continued reading. He thought he heard Laura's laughter at one point, but he did not see her when his eyes flashed across his audience.

"— and she would gather about her other little children, and make their *eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days."*

HE CLOSED the book and sat down. The Dr Pepper clock told him it was much later than he thought. He felt drained and his throat hurt.

Someone was clapping, then faster, more vigorously. Boone

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turned. Mary Alice was at the counter, smiling like a bride and applauding. It must have been contagious, because the applause crescendoed and filled the diner. From all around the room, faces looked at him with such open appreciation that he was overwhelmed by the flood of emotion pushing against him. He found the little blonde girl. Her grin, like her eyes, was wide and bright. She clapped her small hands in a blurred frenzy.

Boone inhaled deeply again, then released the air slowly, amazed at how good it felt. The squeezing pressure on his chest was gone. He felt buoyant, as though a dead weight had been taken away. He closed his eyes. For the first time in months, he might not be afraid to dream tonight. Good-bye, Emma. Sweet dreams.

Bells jangled raucously as the glass door swung open so fast Boone thought it would fly off its hinges. A six-foot *thing* with red stripes scuttled into the diner. At the top of its spade-shaped head, four black glassy orbs reflected the fluorescents, and its six — no, eight — sticklike arms gestured wildly in the air.

"They're comin'!" the thing declared in a thick Arkansas drawl. "I've been listenin'! It's real this time!" Its long head jerked quickly back and forth, then stopped when it saw Boone. All sound stopped, except for the blood pounding in Boone's ears.

"Eule," John said real slow, crushing a cigarette between thumb and index finger. "You done gone and fucked up real good."

Fear kicked out surprise in Boone's brain. He got cold all over, like during the accident, and his heart hurt in his chest. Oh, God, he cried inside, then someone reached out and stroked his mind with soft, mothering fingers.

A wave of calm flowed over him. *Don't be frightened,* it told him, and he was amazed to find that he wasn't. There were no words, but ideas and images burst in his head like fireworks. Warm hands touched his thoughts, laying on comfort and care. The swirling montage became more ordered, carefully selected, and was laid end to end into a compressed chronicle that Boone's mind strained to comprehend. His mind was a stage on which was playing wondrous dramas — comedies, romances, histories, and tragedies. He gasped at the grandeur of the production.

A Ship tweaking the space between the stars. Passengers and crew from the overpopulated regions in the galaxy's fat middle. A pleasure cruise, that's all. To the sparse stars out there on the fringe. To lose oneself in new experiences. Or find oneself. To forget lost loves, and a war; to see

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fresh wonders after the old ones go stale. To get away from it all.

Then disaster. A failure (impossible to show). The Ship pulls over to a small, wet world. Not even in the brochure. Brokedown.

Almost fifty years ago now. New lives among the locals. Playing roles, hiding behind protective mental costumes. Revealing all to only a few, carefully chosen natives (those who can't handle it soon forget). There's a young, brown-haired girl delighted by tales of the stars and the folks who live out there. She grows to mother them, give what human care she can while they await rescue. Ship gives what gifts it can, which they share with her. She makes a place for them in her world, and finds a place in theirs.

Their despair and loss seeped into Boone's bones. He felt the weight of thousands of years of life among those stars, roaming, traveling, experiencing. He learned of the loneliness that came from being isolated on a world so backward you can't even show your real body; from having half a galaxy between you and the ones you love. He learned how they had survived with what they had left — each other, and the flickering warmth of hope.

The impressions blurred and scattered, pressed away by soft mental fingers that apologized for intruding this way. As they carefully slid out of his mind, they left behind swirls of sadness like smudgy fingerprints. Sorrow from folks who understood, in their own way, what hurt him. The last tendril of thought he felt was disappointment that they had nothing to give *him*. When he opened his eyes, Boone saw the old black man in the next booth. The man was staring into him with those deep, dark eyes, and Boone knew where the comforting mental touches had come from. That old, old, *old* man had been there all along.

Boone thought of Laura and Emma, and the last residue of hurt quietly evaporated. Anxiety drained down his back, freeing clenched muscles for the first time since . . . too long. Be happy, he said softly. Wherever you are.

Like a tower of cards, the tension throughout the room collapsed.

John stood up, looking relieved, and flicked his cigarette across the room. It bull's-eyed the trash can next to Mary Alice. "You sure this time, Eule?"

Eule, looking just the way Boone expected him to — a balding, pudgy man in a plaid flannel shirt — nodded fervently.

"You betcha! I've been tracking 'em all afternoon. I would've phoned

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you, but —" he shrugged, "I didn't want to lose 'em. And I guess I got too excited to think straight. The beacon's on, they know where we are, and they're on their way! We finally got ourselves a tow truck, everybody!"

A rebel yell erupted from a far booth. A whistling sound came from somewhere else. Something like bells chimed from a booth near the men's room.

Then all hell broke lose.

Rita was the first to lose her shape, twisting like wet Play-Doh in a kid's fists. Patterns of light trickled down her form. When they faded, a green plant with gold-tipped fronds was sipping tea from a china cup.

John was going all fuzzy like bad TV reception, wrapped in an electric-blue nimbus. For a second, Boone thought he saw a bulky brown mass where John used to be. Its tentacles fused together and it shifted and flowed like a sidewalk chalk painting in the rain. When the nimbus faded, a walrus in Victorian apparel sat happily munching on oysters. The white-headed war hero became a Fabergé egg with hundreds of undulating cilia, then joined the walrus as a familiar well-fed carpenter. Boone's hand flew to his mouth just in case his heart decided to make a flying leap up his throat.

The door bells jangled. Flowing out into the parking lot was a pandemonium of glowing, jumping, running, flying, shifting, shouting, chirping impossibilities. Where Lou Ann had been, Sherlock Holmes peered through an eyeglass at the paw prints of an enormous hound. The Great Detective looked up and met Boone's stare. The chiseled features melted. Boone was gazing into the gold-coin eyes of a Bradbury Martian (in the flickering instant between Detective and Martian, Boone glimpsed a jade-green snake with slender arms).

Hamlet's father's dead and buried ghost cast dark prophecies near the ladies' room. At the cash register, a vintage Asimov robot rummaged through the postcards. The Tin Woodsman clinked beer glasses with the Cat in the Hat.

Boone looked for Claude. On the stool sat a man-sized kernel of popped corn. With no remotely human features, it still managed to look downright glum, sitting there clutching a Miller Lite with a chitin-shelled claw. A yellow stain marred the small spot on its front. Something soft and slightly hairy clasped Boone's hand. He looked down to see a hobbit tugging him toward the door, where a lovely fairy-tale princess dimpled

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invitingly. She flew into the parking lot as the same tale's dragon. Boone followed.

Mary Alice was out there, her laughter ringing over the raucous carnival. A miniature Buck Rogers rocketship buzzed past her head. She twirled to follow its flight. Boone thought of Emma chasing a butterfly.

A cloud of sweetly scented smoke settled in front of Boone's face. It twisted in a breeze that wasn't there, and formed five fat fingers that pointed toward the back of the pickup, where a tremendous caterpillar sat smoking a hookah and serenely blowing colorful smoke rings. It peered at Boone with wise eyes. Familiar eyes. Black like space, as deep as time. In his mind, Boone *felt* something about believing six impossible things before breakfast.

Mary Alice was beside him, squeezing his arm. "They're thanking you," she said. "For the readin'. And for hurtin' a little with 'em." The autumn breeze toyed with her hair, and Boone glimpsed what she must have looked like fifty years ago. She had changed very little, actually. "All this was at the top of your head when they spoke to you. They figgered you'd like it." A sliver of sadness pierced her voice. It was going to be hard for her to say good-bye. They stared out into the parking lot together, at the shifting wondrousness and unabashed cartoon cheeriness of the scene.

Lights appeared over the trees. Two, four, a half-dozen of them. They grew larger as they approached, round disks gliding silently in formation.

"Here they come!" the Wizard Merlin shouted.

Everyone casually shifted to their natural forms. The lights came nearer, scraping the tops of the dogwoods. They hovered over the parking lot, throbbing with unearthly energies. Colors flowed along their smooth, round shapes. They descended toward the asphalt. Then, in tight choreography, they flashed brilliantly, made a rude noise in unison, and whooshed up into the sky. They merged into a single bright dot and vanished through a hole in the clouds, lost among the thin sprinkle of autumn stars.

For a long moment, only the insects and the wind made any sound. Then the Claude-thing stamped an appendage on the asphalt.

"Fuck! The bastards didn't even stop to give us a lift!" It transformed into a small, brown-suited man for the sole purpose of clenching his hand in an ancient, very human, gesture. The middle finger jabbed the sky. "*BASTARDS!*"

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* * *

Mary Alice poured Boone some fresh decaf. Rita and Billy were pushing chunks of pie around on their plates with their forks. Claude sat on his stool, mumbling curses that Boone knew had never been heard on Earth before. Eule sat with John, shaking his head so that light gleamed off his bald spot like a distress signal.

"Now, Eule," John said, opening a fresh pack of Pall Malls. "You done good. You didn't know they was just punks on a joyride. Hell, we wouldn't've wanted to ride with 'em anyway. Who knows *where* we woulda ended up?"

"Yeah," Eule said glumly, poking his finger into a Double-Chocolate Surprise with extra whipped cream.

It hurt to watch. They had hoped for so much, only to be jerked around like that.

Mary Alice touched Boone's arm. "You can stay here as long as you like," she said. "I could use an extra hand round here. 'Sides, they sure do like them stories of yours. I'll bet they'd like you to keep on readin' to 'em, if you think you want to. Till they get their spaceship fixed."

A willing audience. Folks who understood what childlike wonder was all about. A family. He thought of his wife and daughter. The memories would remain a hollow ache in his soul. But, like the universe, life is a big place, with plenty of room for both pleasure and pain. Sometimes you have to help the good stuff outshine the bad. And he still had some good stuff to give.

"O.K.," he said. For now. Just long enough to heal his own wounds, and help with theirs.

Boone watched Mary Alice as she went back behind the counter and wiped the Coke machine with a gray rag. "Mary Alice," he said. "Where *is* their ship?"

"Well now, hon," she said, and pulled a spigot on the soda fountain. A basso-profundo rumble shook the room, and the diner went fuzzy around the edges. The floor trembled and dishes rattled angrily in the sink. Everything almost became *something* else. Then the fuzziness faded and the diner came back into sharp, orange-upholstered focus. Mary Alice skewered Boone with a mischievous-child look. "That's just a secret I'll keep to myself, thank you."

From the next booth, the old, old black man raised his cup and tipped it

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ever so slightly toward Boone. Those ancient, wrinkled lips pulled upward into a smile.

Boone stirred in more sweetener, then sprinkled in a little creamer. A nondairy spiral galaxy evolved on the black coffee. Its wispy arms formed and broke apart and formed again as it revolved.

". . . happy combined birthdays, Mr. Presidents, happy birthdays to you!"

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Kij Johnson got married, moved from the East Coast to the West Coast, and sold her first novel to Tor Books all in the last six months. She now works for Dark Horse Comics, and writes in her spare time. "Schrodinger's Cathouse" came to her when she was living in Brooklyn, New York with her husband, the writer Robert J. Howe. She credits him with the inspiration for this story.

Schrödinger's Cathouse

By Kij Johnson

BOB IS DRIVING DOWN Coney Island Avenue in the rain. His dust-blue Tempo veers a little as he struggles with a box: something small, in brown paper, with no return address. He was going to take it home from the post office and open it, but he got curious at a stoplight, and now, even though the light's changed and he's splashing toward Brighton Beach in medium traffic, he's still picking at the tape that holds the top shut. A bus pulls in front of him just as the tape peels free and the box opens.

Bob looks around. The room he has suddenly found himself in is large. The walls are covered with vividly flocked paper, fuchsia and crimson in huge swirls that look a little like fractals. He blinks: no, the pattern is dark blue, with silver streaks, like the patterns of electrons in a cloud

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chamber. The bar in front of him is polished walnut, ornately carved with what might be figures, and might be only abstract designs. No, it's chrome, cold and smooth under his fingers. *Wait a second,* he thinks, and he remembers: driving his Tempo down Coney Island Avenue in the rain. The box. Bob blinks again: the walls are red and fuchsia again.

There are people in the room: he sees them reflected in the mirror behind the bar. They are draped over the wing chairs, which are covered in a violent red velvet, or they walk across the layered oriental rugs in poses of languor. They all wear suggestive attire: a lilac corset with lemon-yellow stockings; a leather jacket over a chain harness over bare flesh; nineteenth-century women's lingerie, with the crisp, lace-edged white camisole and pantaloons that appear not to have a crotch, although nothing peeks out but pubic hair; a man's red union suit. There is something unsettling about them all, but Bob isn't sure what it is.

"Well?" The swarthy bartender wipes out a glass with a dirty towel and slams it onto the walnut bar in front of Bob.

"What?" he says, startled. The bar used to be — something else, he thinks. The man snorts impatiently.

The people reflected in the mirror — exactly what gender are they? Bob turns to look: no, it's very hard to tell. The men — the ones dressed like men, anyway — are rather small and fine-boned, and the women — or the ones dressed in corsets and such — seem fairly large. They sit on what are now aqua leather couches, move across what is now pale gray carpet.

"Your drink?"

Bob licks his lips, which are suddenly dry, and turns around to face the bartender, whose mustache is blond and curls up at the tips. His skin is very pale.

"Didn't you used to be darker?" Bob asks.

The man snorts again. "What're you drinking?"

"Gin," Bob says distractedly. "I don't even know *where* I'm drinking."

Clean-shaven and dark-skinned, the bartender walks away still holding the towel. "But my drink —" Bob starts.

The bartender snorts a third time and picks up another glass.

Bob looks down, and there is a glass of clear oily fluid resting on the bar, which is now chrome, dully reflecting the blue-and-silver wallpaper. *Wait a minute,* he thinks suddenly. *This cannot possibly be right. Where the hell am I, anyway?* Bob squeezes his eyes shut.

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"I know: it's strange." The voice in Bob's ear is calm and slightly amused. A cool hand touches his wrist, strong, broad fingertips resting against his pulse. "The first time here is very unsettling. You have to figure out the certainties, and then you'll be better."

"I don't know what you mean," Bob says, eyes still scrunched up.

"There's always a bar, even if it looks different every so often," the voice says, sounding as if it were cataloging. "There is always a mirror. The seating is always in the same approximate places. It changes, though; that can be upsetting. The beds upstairs — they stay. Well, of course, they would — after all, we *are* a whorehouse. And a bar. The customers never change: why would they? But members of the staff may change a bit. After a few visits, though, you'll be able to recognize most of us most of the time. It's not so bad. Open your eyes."

"Where am I?" Bob asks.

"The Boîte." The voice sounds amused. "C'mon."

Bob slits one eye at his drink: the bar is chrome again, but his drink is still clear and oily-looking. With a sigh of relief, he reaches out and snags it, lifts it to his mouth. The gin is sharp and spicy, ice-cold. He gasps a little and opens both of his eyes. A mirror: yes. The people are still there, reflected in it, or Bob thinks so: they could be different people. The aqua couches, with the blue walls; when he blinks: yes, red armchairs again, with the flocked wallpaper. Next to the NEC cash register on the bar is a little card with the Visa and MasterCard icons on it, and in handwriting beneath it: CASH OR CHARGE ONLY — NO CHECKS!

"Feel better?"

Bob does feel better; he takes another swig of his drink — still gin, still ice-cold, still like open-heart massage — and smiles at his reflection. Still Bob. He turns to the person who's been speaking to him.

She — if it is a she — is a redhead, with a smooth, flat haircut that stops at her strong jawline. She's wearing a fur coat with — apparently —nothing beneath it. Bob gets a glimpse of peach-colored skin and downy blonde hairs where the coat falls away from her thigh. She is wearing a single earring, a crystal like a chandelier's drop in her left ear. Her? He thinks so.

A knockout, he thinks, *if it's a woman.*

"I'm Jacky," she says, and holds out her hand. It seems a little big for a woman's hand, but maybe a little small for a man's.

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"Bob," Bob says. "Um, where exactly am I? You said, but I didn't quite —" He pauses.

"The Boîte." She picks up a glass filled with something clear from the carved walnut bar. "It's French. One of the Boss's little jokes."

"The Boss?"

"Mr. S. Mr. Schrödinger. You don't get it?" Jacky pauses, tilts her head to one side. Her earring hangs away from her face. It's in her right ear now.

Bob clenches his eyes shut again. "Jesus Christ. Go away."

Jacky's voice continues. "It's your first time, poor thing; I bet no one's explained any of this stuff to you, have they?"

"Just go away. You're all some sort of dream."

There is a sound that might be a fingernail pushing an ice cube around a lowball glass. "You know about the cat, don't you? She's around here somewhere, if she's alive. Well, she is and she isn't; I say it, but it never makes any sense to me either. Like the Trinity, not that they — it, I mean — has anything to do with us here. So," she says — and her voice sounds like she's spelling something out to a rather slow child — "This. Is. The. Box."

Bob maneuvers the glass he still holds to his lips and drains it. Still gin. He opens one eye and glances sidelong at Jacky. Earring in the left ear. Was that where it was last time? The gin is starting to make itself felt; he can't exactly remember. "So this is like limbo?"

"Sort of." Jacky shrugs. The fur slips fetchingly, briefly exposing a broad, smooth shoulder before she pulls it closed again. "It's a lot more like a cathouse, though. I'm certainly thirsty."

Bob leans across the bar and taps the bartender on the shoulder. "Another for the lady," Bob says; he bites his tongue at the bartender's sneer as the man turns his back.

Jacky sips from her full glass and smacks her lips.

"Jesus, how do you guys do that?" Bob asks. "It was empty a second ago."

Jacky smirks. "It both was and was not empty. It partook of both states at once. No"— she says, and holds up her hand as Bob opens his mouth to speak — "I don't know any more than that, so don't ask me. I just know it works. Look at your glass: is it empty or full?"

Bob looks down. "Empt— No, it's—" He stopped.

"Don't think too much. Take a sip."

Bob sips. Gin. He gulps. When his eyes have stopped watering, Bob

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says, "This is all too confusing for me."

"Well, it would be. So are you interested?"

"In what?" he asks carefully.

"This is a whorehouse; what do you think?"

"Sex?" His pants seem to tighten when he thinks of it. But the broad shoulders, the big hands — "Uh, Jacky. . . ." His voice trails off.

She pouts a little. "Don't you like me? I thought you did. I look just your type; but if I got it wrong, maybe the Madam can —"

"No," Bob says, and swallows hard: he seems to be having trouble standing. "No, I like you fine; I like you best of everyone here; you're very, uh, attractive. But, uh—"

"What?"

The earring has changed places once more; he's positive of it this time. *Damn it,* he realizes fuzzily, *I'm starting to like the look.* "You *are* a woman, aren't you?"

"What possible difference can that make?"

"I, uh, just prefer women; that's all."

"I thought you preferred me?"

"Well, what are you?" *Jesus, I must be drunk.*

Jacky laughs something that would be a giggle if Bob were a little more sure of her gender. "You asked for it." She drops her fur off her shoulders.

Jacky's skin is smooth and moderately muscled, with dark nipples half-erect in the air. Jacky has soft ash-blonde pubic hair, with a small trail of fur leading down from her navel. What Jacky doesn't have are genitalia: no penis. And no breasts. She's — Bob's not certain of that *she* again — too muscled to look comfortably feminine, too smooth to be really male. Bob can feel himself shriveling, looking at her.

Jacky tilts her head to one side again, as if she can hear the air being let out of his tires. "This is The Boîte, right? Schrödinger's. So, what's inside the box? Me. and I could be a pussy, or I could be a pistol."

"What?" Bob is mesmerized by the sight of her body. *Wonder what her skin feels like.*

"You won't know, of course, which I am until I come. Neither will I. You have to make me come first, and then I'll turn out to be one or the other. And then we'll *really* get going."

"What if you're male?"

Jacky leans forward until her face is inches from Bob's. Her high — or

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low — voice whispers against his lips, "I'll still be the best you've ever had."

Bob licks his lips. "I have to make you come first?"

She nods.

"How do I make you come when I don't know what to do?"

"I'll show you."

"All—" Bob stops and clears his throat. "All right, then."

Jacky straightens briskly. "It's fifty a shot, so to speak — we checked your finances; you can afford it — automatically withdrawn from either your Visa or MasterCard. Unless you'd prefer to pay cash?" Bob shakes his head. "Mostly they don't," says Jacky, nodding with satisfaction. "Visa, then? O.K. We already have your number. Ready?"

"Yes," Bob croaks. "Can we go upstairs now?"

Jacky leads him up a broad flight of stairs lavishly ornamented with statuary depicting fauns and satyrs being raped by nymphs — or is it the other way around? Bob's having a little trouble focusing. He pulls at Jacky's fur, which slides off her shoulders, but she keeps moving up the stairs.

He catches Jacky at the door to a room and pulls her close, kissing her hard. He feels her body crushed against him, the flatness of chest and silky skin stretched over hard muscle. Her hand is sliding under his belt, flat-palmed against his belly, moving down until she has his rigid penis under her fingertips, pulling and pressing. Bob fumbles the door open, and they cascade into a room that might be red or might be honey-colored. They pull apart for a second: Jacky drops the fur coat. At the sight of the body, Bob hesitates again.

"What's wrong?" Jacky says, moving to stand chest to chest with him. She is just his height.

"I just wish I knew you were a woman; that's all."

She laughs once, a low bark. "Except, you never *do* know. You only think you do."

The bus accelerates until Bob can see around it again. The box he got at the post office lies in his lap, its flaps folded closed. Rain is smearing the windshield; Bob adjusts the timer and turns on the headlights before he remembers the cathouse. "What the—" he says aloud. The bar that kept changing, Jacky and that strange conversation, and the room—

So which was she—he! Why can't I remember! Bob is most of the way to Brighton Beach before he figures it out. The box is closed, after all.

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"Detritus Affected" is the second story David Brin has written which came to him as a dream, after reading about urban archaeologists who find readable newspapers four decades old under tons of supposedly "bio-degradable" debris. "Our landfills are less frightening than most other forms of pollution," David writes, "yet they typify the squandering, spendthrift attitude of the age. If, in a million years, our garbage turns to stone, I wonder what properties that mineral might have, which once contained so many tossed-away dreams." David has studied comets and various projects for NASA, as well as teaching university physics and writing courses. He has won the Hugo, Nebula, Locus and John W. Campbell Awards for his novels and short stories, which include Startide Rising, The Uplift War, The Postman, *and his ecological thriller,* Earth. *His latest novel,* Glory Season, *will appear from Bantam this spring. He recently returned from two years living in France with his wife, Cheryl Brigham, who is also a space scientist. They have a new son, Benjamin Robert, to whom this story is pledged.*

Detritus Affected

By David Brin

PHYSICIANS SWEAR A Hippocratic Oath, whose central vow is "do no harm." I wonder — how many other professions might do well to set that goal above all others?

Schliemann, uncovering Troy, gave birth to modern archaeology, begetting it in sin. His clumsy pits tore through the gates and temples of forty levels — three thousand years — callously scattering what might have been sifted, deciphered, all to prove a fact that wasn't going anywhere. Patience would have revealed the same truth, in time.

The next wave of diggers learned from Schliemann's wrongs. They went about "restoring" ancient sites, sweeping dust from disney-prim aisles of artfully restacked columns. Such conceit.

Today, we *save* dust, sampling pollen grains to tell what blossoms once grew on the hills surrounding Karakourom, or Harrapa, or fabled Nineveh.

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In truth, we have conceits all our own.

FRIDAY

LOOK, SEE this broken plastic wheel? Part of a cheap toy, circa 1970. Giveaway prize in some fast food outlet's promotional kiddie meal. Seventy grams of carboniferous petroleum cooked under limestone sediments for two hundred million years, only to be sucked up, refined, press-molded, passed across a counter, squealed over, and then tossed in next week's trash.

And here's a flattened cardboard box bearing the logo of a long-defunct stereo store, stained on one side by a mass of nondescript organic matter which we'll analyze later in lab, sampling and correlating what garbage once flew between these hills. Hills overlooking fabulous L.A.

Science is never ideal, Professor Paul used to tell us. *In the present, as well as the past, real life is all about compromises.* Not as lofty a slogan as a Hippocratic Oath, I'll admit, but what do you expect from a profession based on rooting through the cellars, garbage heaps, and vanities of bygone days?

We managed to dig down past the thirty meter level this week, into rich veins of profligacy from a time that knew no limits. It is a smorgasbord feast of information and I want to analyze everything. Each gum wrapper. Each crushed styrofoam peanut and brown ketchup stain. I fantasize computers potent enough to work backward from the positions I find each of these wonders in, tracing how they came to be jammed next to each other under this great pile. I dream of reversing their tumble from grunting, stinking dumptrucks, re-enveloping them in wrappers of shiny black plastic and following each bundle back to its source — the effluent of a single twentieth century home.

It can't be done. Not today. It would be like asking Schliemann to sift for pollen instead of ripping through ancestral walls in search of gold. Perhaps future researchers will dissolve ancient cities, atom by atom, recording the location and orientation of each *molecule* so that the dust of pharaoh, slave, and temple cat might be tagged, trajectoried, and finally re-assembled on a chip like God's own jigsaw puzzle, resurrecting the dead in simulated splendor, if not the hoped-for afterlife.

My techniques are crude in comparison to what may come. Only a minuscule portion of the raw data we dig up is captured on photos, slides,

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and these journal entries. "Slash and burn archaeology," Keoki called it last week, in black humor.

Yet, each evening when the day's work is done, I climb out of our trench to look across the vast expanse that is Hyperion, and am consoled. Our trench is just fifty meters by fourteen, while the landfill stretches in all directions.

Mile after mile of garbage. The largest midden — the largest single *thing* — ever built by human civilization. Bigger, by volume, than even China's Great Wall.

There'll be plenty left over, after we are through digging here. Plenty of data for others to plumb through later, with fine future sieves.

I'm no Schliemann. I do little harm.

MONDAY

SOMETIMES AN object strikes me in a certain way, and I wonder — could this have once been *mine*!

I am bemused by how different that makes this research from any other I've done. My own father or mother might have thrown out this box, that sofa or old turntable, back when I was very young. The thought makes me sensitive to toys. Pathetic, broken bits of plastic and metal. They grow less electronic and more sturdy with each meter we descend into the past, affecting me with something between *déjà vu* and a poignant sense of lost innocence.

Then my beeping pager interrupts, and I must climb back to the present world, dealing with the latest crisis.

Never have I faced so much political aggravation on a dig! Each day some old fart bureaucrat comes on-site, scratching his head and muttering confused objections. Even the infamous red tape of India pales in comparison. There, or in Egypt, you could smooth things over with a little honest baksheesh. Here, a bribe would just land me in jail without ever discovering what it is these people want!

One learns to be resourceful. Always, in every government department, one can find some bright youngster who is off the formal chain of command. The idea boy. Trouble-shooter gal. This techie plays no office games, but simply makes things run. Boss is usually terrified of Wunder-Kid, so I invite them up together. All moon-wrapped in full breathing gear against the occasional methane blurp, they get a full cook's tour. Nearly

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always, the young guy goes crazy over something we've found, leaves with an armload of gamma-sanitized "memorabilia"... and makes damn sure we get our permit, license, whatever.

Works every time.

It's been much the same with the press. One curmudgeon city editor had it in for us from the moment our department got this grant. Tried angling stories about disease germs, festering in the dump along with five billion ancient, disposable diapers. Radio DJs and Net Jockeys came to our rescue . . . so effectively the cops had to cordon off Sanitation Road, keeping out hordes of young amateurs who flocked up to "help out."

Los Angeles. Who can figure? Some oldtime rocker once said — "No place is ever weirder than your own native land." Maybe that's why, after years exploring the past far away, I finally came back home to dig.

WEDNESDAY

INCH BY inch we descend, uncovering mundane wonders. For example, we keep finding newspapers so well-preserved they could even be read by moonlight. So much for biodegradability. No archaeologist ever had better help dating strata.

Household mail is a rich font of information. Charge slips and bank records found their way into the trash, along with old tax files and all kinds of revealing junk mail. When my student, Joyce Barnes, released some wonderful stats on Twen Cen credit-slavery, a retiree group in Laguna filed suit under some old privacy laws, in an effort to stop the dig. That storm blew over for lack of public support. Today's kids hardly know what an envelope is. If it's not in the Net, what do they care?

Meanwhile, Leslie surveys dietary patterns of Angelenos past. When we penetrated beyond the era of microwave ovens, he found a sudden shift in the packaging poisons found in ready-to-heat food residue. The Department of Urban Pathology at UCLA has expressed keen interest in this work.

Zola chose to study the "replacement threshold" — at which point it used to be more price effective to throw out a machine than repair it. Nothing better typifies the subject era than the sight of countless appliances — from TVs to dishwashers to stereos — all tossed because newer, better models cost less than a technician might charge to find a burnt transistor.

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Keoki pays the freight, testing rich veins of complex organics and heavy metals for our industrial sponsor. It's a long shot, but if the assay proves out, Fabrique Chang may bid to come mine Hyperion. One generation's junk can be the next's mother lode.

So much for all that talk, earlier, about setting fields aside for future archaeologists. Maybe it's human nature to spoil what we strive to comprehend. Maybe we're all Schliemann, under the skin.

Oh, don't be so cynical, Joe-boy. It's late. Put away the journal and go to bed. Tomorrow is another day.

FRIDAY

BY NOW I thought we'd wrestled every county, state and federal agency, from public health to Indian Affairs, but I never expected to be stopped dead by the Coroner's Office!

Zola found the bones down at South-22, a neat row of ribs sticking through a pile of dingy rags. At first we thought it was a pet, some large dog. On realizing they were human, we had no choice but to report it. We're digging in strata from 1958 a.d., after all. It might be somebody's long-missing great uncle.

What a mess! Reporters and detectives trampling through the pit. Hot lights reviving dormant aromatics, making the place stink to Sheol. Yellow police tape stretching back and forth in a confusing maze. Fortunately, some of the cops seemed competent and sympathetic. I watched as one young homicide investigator worked delicately with a brush and evidence kit. I couldn't help kibitzing about the effects of time and anaerobic chemistry on fingerprints. Finally — perhaps to shut me up — Lieutenant Starling invited me through the cordon to help.

Turns out our jobs have interesting overlaps, and even more interesting, quirky differences. Afterwards, we cleaned up and talked shop until late. Her profession seems narrowly focused from my point of view. But I can relate. We're both in the business of piecing together clues, reading hidden stories.

This morning, the lieutenant overruled her gruff sergeant to let us resume work at the north end, while her crew keeps fussing down south. It's hard not to be bothered by all the commotion nearby, but I exhibit calm concentration for the sake of the team. We are professional time travellers, after all, privileged to visit the past. No distraction should

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make us forget our jobs.

SUNDAY

AT A pace that makes glaciers seem juggernauts, the Earth's Pacific Plate grinds alongside the North American Plate. Unlike the head-on collision shoving up the Himalayas, this glancing blow makes modest mountains. Where Hyperion now squats once lay a gentle alley where mule deer grazed and condors soared. Quite recently, in geologic time, the Shoshone discovered a rough paradise here. Then, in an eyeblink, Spaniards came to graze their cattle. Hopalong Cassidy filmed exploits where I stand each day, or rather, many meters lower down, where molder the smothered roots of ancient oaks.

When burgeoning Los Angeles engulfed these hills, little upland valleys like these seemed ideal sites for dumping refuse. Regiments of trucks came and went, day in, day out, their way lit by torches burning off methane gas as buried garbage fermented. More matter moved here in just one year than Rome put into its roads. More than was shifted for canals at Suez or Panama. Then, sooner than anyone predicted, a flat plain stretched between former peaks and the trucks had to move on.

Nowadays, the gas gets piped away. You can't build on this kind of unsteady fill, so no one expected visitors to this abandoned place, despite its poetical name. Not until slow processes turned detritus into a new kind of stone.

Then we arrived to dig and pry.

No human trait ever stirred up such trouble as curiosity.

MONDAY

DETECTIVE STARLING finished her investigation. Her report —inconclusive, except to say the bones date from the time of the surrounding stratum.

Net tabloids are rife with speculation about gangland executions. Artists' renderings show mobsters ceremoniously interring their victim beneath a sea of waste. Getting the dates all wrong, someone nicknamed the skeleton "Jimmy H."

Unfortunately for sensationalists, there were no obvious signs of foul play. That didn't keep some of the police brass from trying to shut us down. But Helen Starling saw no legal cause and refused to sign the order,

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so we're back in business! After a decent interval, I must find a good way to thank her.

TUESDAY

THE DAY after work resumed, I found a strange note in my mailbox. Scrawled on real paper in a thin, cramped style, it simply read — LEAVE IT BE!

Some kook, I guess. Why should anyone care about a half dozen eggheads, scratching around in garbage?

WEDNESDAY

EUROPEANS laugh when Americans speak of "history." As for Los Angeles, you can find every nationality on Earth within ten minutes of downtown, but each draws its heritage from somewhere else. Here in the "World City," everyone is rootless, and often *glad* to be cut loose from the past.

Besides, who needs to dig in order to know this place? L.A.'s story is well-documented in newspaper files, ledgers, videotape. Was any culture ever so self-involved? Books on current slang and pop culture come out every year. As they say about pornography — nothing is left to the imagination.

Still, there is something special about the layers we visit. They represent a time and place unlike any other, when people remade reality in new, garish colors, unrestrained by precedent. Towering creativity mixed with profound stupor. Rock bands and symphony orchestras. Stench and stainless steel. Nothing compares save renaissance Florence, also the object of scorn, hatred, and ultimately envy. Someday, people may romanticize TwenCen LA as they do the time of Michelangelo.

And pigs might fly?

They do. One Angeleno took his pet porker hang-gliding. I have the newspaper in front of me, circa 1978.

What a place.

THURSDAY

NO TIME for a personal entry tonight.

Today's big discovery — this time at South 31 — four more sets of bones.

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FRIDAY

MY WHAT a fuss. They're still hollering downtown, but the upshot is obvious. They need expert help and the only place to find skilled hands quickly is right here on-site. I'm sitting quietly, twiddling my thumbs till they ask.

SATURDAY

THEY ASKED. Helen gave us a one-day cram course on how to be Junior Crime Scene Investigators, then deputized and put us to work. Since then it's been slow going, but we're used to that. Only big difference is we don't have to watch our budget, agonizing over what to put in labeled plastic bags and what to discard. Near the bodies, we save everything.

Everybody in the world wants to come to Hyperion. The crowd control cordon stretches miles. Helicopters buzz, along with scores of whirring auto-cams, sent over by newsie-mags and hobbyists. Police drones snap up those straying too close. Still it's quite a din.

The press is calling it "Jimmy's Pit." Reporters scan old missing person files like bloodhounds, eager to break the story of the year — who the victims were, why they were dumped here, and who might've dunnit. The city is having a wonderful time.

Well, not everybody. I found another note last night, on coming home.

STOP IT NOW. The scrawled piece of paper read. BEFORE YOU REGRET IT.

Too late, whoever you are. Events now have their own momentum. Tomorrow we start lateral holes, expanding the trench in case one or two more bodies might lie buried nearby.

Funny what bothers you at a time like this. Amid all this furor, what bugs me is the coincidence . . . how unlikely it was that we should have randomly chosen a site directly over Jimmy and company. To a scientist — and a detective, I suppose — coincidence is an awfully suspicious thing.

MONDAY

ZOLA WAS in tears when she reported finding the child. A five-year-old, judging from the little bones. This time the clothing was well-preserved. A pink and blue print dress. We all stared as Keoki

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and a police pathologist worked. That was when we realized this was no gangland dumping fround.

Half an hour later, Leslie gave a shout. He had found another pair of skeletons. Then, suddenly, it seemed diggers were yelling from all sides. Autocams began colliding overhead as newsies dove in for pix and we scurried from one set of remains to the next. In minutes, word flashed across the Net to every continent.

Massacre in L.A.!

Tomorrow, over my protests, Helen brings in bulldozers.

Ah, Schliemann.

TUESDAY

FOR A time, during the Second World War, the city of Los Angeles mandated compulsory recycling. Materials of all kinds were needed for the effort, from glass and metals to paper and baking fat. Nothing is wasted when you pay heed to the true value of things. Very little refuse wound up coming to Hyperion during those years.

Then, with the war fading into memory, a candidate ran for mayor on a crowd-pleasing platform, promising to repeal the inconvenient law. He won handily. Curbside recycling ended and the trucks began rolling as never before. By the ton, by hundreds and thousands of tons. In a few years an average family might throw away a volume of material equal to their home. A new, disposable way of life seemed ordained forever.

Archaeologists could have told them. *Nothing* lasts forever. The Golden Age of Athens waxed and passed away again within a single human lifespan. So did the Age of Waste.

The world won't soon forget either.

According to the Indian Bones Act, any remains less than a thousand years old aren't specimens, but someone's ancestor. You need the local tribe's permission before digging near a burial ground, and must re-inter all unearthed bones with honors.

Fair enough, but I never thought I'd see the Act applied to *this* project. Today, while yellow machines peeled away detritus for a bigger trench, lawyers arrived with injunctions to halt the *desecration of graves!* Turns out they were fronting for the same bunch of retirees who tried to stop us

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earlier. Don't these people have better things to do with their time?

The dozers stopped for just three hours, then the stay was overruled and digging resumed. I stood around watching machines tear through layers it had taken us months to penetrate with brush and trowel. Wonderful items kept popping into view, only to vanish into hoppers and be carried away. I stopped Keoki and Les from chasing between flashing back-hoe blades, plucking enticing tidbits. Without careful photography and provenance, none of it would provide useful data. So I set them to work tarping over the north end of the old trench, prèserving it from contamination.

I'm making this entry with my portable. We've set up a pressurized tent and sleeping quarters, partly because work continues round the clock now, and partly because each of us has had anonymous death threats. Zola's house was vandalized and someone fired a shot through Les's window. We voted to stay together onsite till it all blows over.

FRIDAY

HELEN CALLED the dozers off as we neared early-fifties strata. An army of muscular cops waded in, under our direction, and soon hit bones.

And more bones! More than we can count by searchlight, all mixed in with old boxes and bedsprings, melon rinds and tea bags, newspapers and candy wrappers.

Ribcages. Vertebrae. Femurs. Grinning skulls.

Lieutenant Starling ordered a halt for coffee, to let people catch their breath. That's when word spread about The Theory. Seems the idea's been criss-crossing the Net all evening, but we hadn't heard till half the world agreed it *must* be the explanation.

When you think about it, none other fits! The 1950s was an era of frantic building in Southern California. Inevitably, greedy developers took shortcuts. If an old graveyard stood in the way, you were supposed to move the bodies and markers with due care, but often the whole mass was just scooped up and dumped in a pit somewhere.

And what better pit than Hyperion Landfill? A few bribes, some turned heads . . . within days, layers of new garbage would hide the evidence. Besides, who was harmed?

It's remarkable how calming a good theory can be. What had verged on

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panic now seems placid as people wander back to work at a slower pace. There is talk of wrapping it all up tomorrow, after all.

I keep my misgivings to myself. Somehow, it all seems too pat.

SATURDAY

IT DIDN'T wash. Not even for a day.

Oh, for a time headlines blared — *Dump of Death Mystery Solved!* Big shots came down and posed next to the bulldozers, anointing the graveyard-dumping theory and announcing that, while this had all been a nice, diverting summertime distraction, it was time to stop wasting taxpayers' money on a minor "crime" whose statute of limitations ran out before most living citizens were born. Time to let the dead rest in peace.

The old farts seemed in an awful hurry to put all this behind them. Some of the young beat reporters said their editors were hastily reassigning them. All told, things smelled pretty fishy.

We sat around pondering.

Suppose some greedy bastards did once gather up the bodies in a cemetery, trucking them off to make room for houses or a shopping mall. That's plausible. But think, what shape would the remains be in, after tumbling together in a hole? I could testify to that, having excavated ancient battlegrounds where armies of Xerxes, or Teng Ho, buried their dead in haste before the sun could rise. The skeletons here in Hyperion looked nothing like those jumbled boneyards. Each one is coherent, whole, and they come spread across an area far too wide for the convenient dumping theory to explain.

We agreed unanimously. We're going back out tonight, orders or no orders.

THURSDAY

HELEN STARLING says her boys found the guy who set fire to my garage. I couldn't have been more surprised to learn it was old Mr. Hansen down the block! Here I'd been expecting some cabal of fundamentalist loonies to be behind the threats and vandalism against my people. But in each case it's been *individual* action by someone they knew. No visible connection between the perpetrators, except their advanced age. It's all very, very weird.

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Haven't made a diary entry in some time. I always thought it part of being a careful scientist, like keeping good field notes. But what we're doing hasn't been science for a long time.

To recap — the big-wigs were horrified to learn we had resumed digging. While they slept, we managed to double the excavation. They then dithered, went back to their offices, made phone calls and issued orders —and we doubled it again. By the time judges signed restraints and had them delivered, the whole chain of command lay in ruins. No cop on the beat was going to enforce a halt.

There were skeletons everywhere!

Big ones, men in their prime. Smaller ones . . . women, children . . . little babies. . . .

None showed discernible traces of violent death. No sign they had ever been moved after burial. The cemetery-dumping scenario evaporated in smoke, never to be raised again.

We kept working shifts, digging, loading trucks, hauling the dross of fifty years away to the far end of Hyperion . . . though some suspect even that step might prove temporary. For the most part, we worked silently, though each of us knows what ferment is crossing the airwaves. A ferment of newer, more imaginative theories.

There is talk of death squads, like they've had from time to time in South America, with vigilantes scouring the city for "undesirables" and burying their victims in the dump. Credible, perhaps, if they had killed dozens, even hundreds, but no way in the numbers we were finding. The same goes for satanic or cannibalistic cults. More colorful notions involve everything from extraterrestrial vivisections to a lost underground civilization. One fellow suggests that something about the specific gravity of bones causes them to migrate through garbage . . . though where they came from in the first place he has no idea.

My favorite idea of the current crop is *spontaneous calcification.* It is based on homeopathy — the notion that all objects carry the imprint of any other object that was ever in contact with them. And what did every single object in Hyperion Landfill have in common? Every one was touched countless times by human beings! Next throw in a crackpot reversal of fossilization — the process by which groundwater leaches calcium from bones and replaces it with the stuff of rock — and you've got an idea that would have surely made it to the New Age Bestseller List, back in my parents' generation.

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Leave trash alone long enough, and it starts precipitating out skeletons. In other words, garbage recapitulates its maker. We are what we waste. A fine, maniacal notion. I don't dismiss it lightly.

Or are they metaphors? Perhaps guilt festers and makes tangible a city's crimes.

What, after all, did we do to the homeless, the forgotten? Those spilled out of mental hospitals to fend on their own? In effect, we threw them away. The malnourished, the ill-educated, the drug-wracked and brain-wounded. We threw out all the possibilities they might have brought to light with strong hands and minds, just as surely as those big trucks carried off all else inconvenient and disposable.

I look back on Persia, China, India . . . wherever I dug and found middens of bones, thinking them burial grounds of real people. Perhaps the same thing happened there, as well. In each culture, *shame* may have leaked from the living, seeping underground to wherever lost hopes go, congealing into hideous shape within the ground. . . .

No, no! I have *felt* the bones in my hands. They are real, stretching away in all directions. They were once draped in flesh, I know it.

People are welcome to their crackpot theories. But, all metaphysics aside, something happened here. Something terrible.

SEPTEMBER

NOBODY IS bothering with police cordons, anymore. Everyone and anyone is welcome to come up to Hyperion, to help dig. Sometimes it seems half the population under fifty must be here, assisting with the excavation, browsing through the detritus, carting things away. It looks like a scene from some fantastic D.W. Griffith epic about the construction of the pyramids, only on a vaster scale. Here, under only the loosest of direction, a mob, a horde, a *civilization* labors amid dust and stink to undo the greatest single edifice built by their ancestors, taking it apart by hand and hauling the bits off in trucks, cars, wheelbarrows.

What our grandparents created here — what they *buried* — is fast growing apparent, and they don't like it. They wander among us, old folks, confused, distracted, grabbing us by the sleeve and begging us to stop. When questioned, none of them can explain why. Tearfully, they just say

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that it's wrong. That we must leave it be.

It's the same with officials, politicians, judges. The eldest issue pronouncements, file writs. We ignore them and dig on, uncovering layer after layer of the dead

A million skeletons so far, with no end in sight.

Reports come in from other cities. Of landfill boneyards in New York, Atlanta, Seattle . . . though none as extensive or dating so far back as Los Angeles. Perhaps that means it happened first and most profoundly here, in L.A.

But what? What happened here? Whence came the dead?

Zola claims the skulls are different from ours. She points to a slight, statistical difference in the shape of the occipital lobe.

"They were more like Neanderthals than we are," she says, with the eagerness of a proselyte. "They would have been more intuitive, more empathic beings. . . ."

Les and I think all this must have driven her over the edge. None of the rest of us can see any difference worth getting excited over.

On the other hand, maybe we don't want to see. Any difference that held true would support the scariest theory of all — that we are *all* murderers.

That we are invaders.

That the true, rightful denizens of L.A. lie buried where our grandparents put them, after slaying them, one by one. In the course of taking over their city, their lives.

The fact that the idea comes straight out of classic sci-fi doesn't repudiate it. The paranoic films of those days may reflect instinctual terror felt by those who *saw* no difference in their friends and family, but somehow knew them for replacements, doppelgängers. Somehow knew their own turn was coming.

It might explain why old folks act the way they do. Deep inside, at some inner core, they are still aliens. Long ago they adopted the memories, behavior, attitudes of the Angelenos they replaced — becoming passionate democrats, republicans, junkies and zen buddhists — but deep down knowing what they were. At some level they still know.

But we, their descendants, were born thinking ourselves human, if a

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bit strange for living in this bizarre city. We grew up glorying in quirky ideas — wild individuality, diversity, cool — and most of all the novel notion that "weird" is no four letter word.

If someone killed a million Angelenos, our first instinct is pure, ironic.

To avenge them.

OCTOBER

THERE IS another theory. We might simply have thrown them all away.

The bodies, I mean.

Just the bodies.

They were ours, and we exchanged them. Traded them in. Got new models. Threw out the old.

Why not? It suits our style. Despite all the new conservation laws we've passed for harder times, despite draconian recycling, despite a soaring cost of living caused by wastrel days, we still think basically the same. Like magpies, we try whatever's shiny, new.

What if someone once made our grandparents an offer they couldn't refuse.

"Sign here, and I'll show you a way to moult and be reborn as livelier, more interesting people! Do this and your city will soar to heights, explore depths, none other has ever known before. Only, in order to trade up, you must forget. Forget about this pact. Forget about the husks you shed. Toss them in the trash along with this week's newspapers and detergent boxes and TV dinner trays! Toss them out, and live!

In retrospect, I wonder about the fine print. Would Angelenos have even stopped to read it, in their hurry to sign such a deal?

I wonder if I'm going mad.

WINTER

HYPERION IS deep . . . deeper than we ever imagined. Yet, slowly, inexorable, it empties itself of all we had put there.

Where the detritus is taken, I don't know. Only that it climbs a hundred trails out of this valley, by machine, by human back, sometimes in a floating haze that seems to scale the dusty hills without aid. Like a superfluid — like some entity awakened — the waste departs, spilling from a container unable to hold it any longer.

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Our dross, our toys, our broken machine servants, our used wrappers . . . how could we ever think the bonds linking us to our things could be broken simply by throwing them away? Destiny firmly connects the maker and the made. User and used. Creation and creator. So it always was, in the myths of Ur and Thebes, and so it always shall be.

We never really threw our things away. We just put them down for a while. Now they are coming home.

MILLENNIUM

PICKED CLEAN, it holds a certain, sterile beauty. A valley of bare, trampled clay between steep hills. Bare clay covered with four million skeletons, the only things now left behind.

It makes a pretty scene — Hyperion Boneyard. Peaceful.

The hordes are gone at last. No one is left save me and a few others, sitting around, waiting. Things are happening behind us, just over the rim, where Los Angeles can be heard fast turning into something different, once again. One or another of the theories must have proven true, by now. Or else no one cares about theories of the past anymore, so involved are they in rapid-breaking changes. Incorporating the reclaimed in what's shiny, new.

Some of us remain in Hyperion, fed from time to time by kindly visitors. We wait, keeping vigil for the others. For those who cannot.

Sometimes it rains. Bones sink bit by bit into the slowly softening mud.

Full of nutrients, I hear. Bones are. They belong in good earth.

Yesterday, I thought I saw a condor, winging close to the sun.

Yes, yes. I know things are going on, elsewhere. I'll go take part again, really. Just as soon as I've rested a bit. Thought a few things out. Seen events through to their conclusion.

I'll just stay here a while longer . . . and watch the first oak grow.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

China Mountain Zhang, by Maureen F. McHugh, Tom Doherty Associates, 320 pp. $19.95

Count Geiger's Blues, by Michael Bishop, Tom Doherty Associates, 374 pp. $19.95

Nightside the Long Sun, by Gene Wolfe, TOR, 333 pp. $21.95

IN THE interest of getting us off on the right foot, let me tell you what I hope to do and don't expect to do in these columns.

First, I don't intend to write "buy this — don't buy this" consumer reports. Since I am a slow reader, I will not be able to keep up with all, or even most, of what is being published, and will be talking about no more than a few books in each column. In compensation I want to deal with them in more detail than I would in simple reviews. At times I will go beyond the book at hand to discuss general issues raised by it. Think of these as review essays.

The long lead time between when I write these columns and when they appear means they will not always be current. Although I will concentrate on books that you can find in your bookstore, I will on occasion talk about works that are old.

I have been reading genre sf and fantasy since I could read. I love sf and fantasy, though not as indiscriminately as I did when I picked up my first copy of *F&SF* in 1963. In addition, I am a writer. What I have to say will be colored by my own experience. I will fairly often have occasion to review books by people I know, and in such cases will try to make my prejudices evident and not allow them to undermine the usefulness of what I have to say.

I make my living teaching courses on American literature, fantasy and science fiction, and fiction writing. Despite (or perhaps because of) my

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having spent much of my adult life in universitites, I have my misgivings about academic criticism. Too much of it is of little use to the average intelligent reader, and of less use to the writer. On the other hand, I am not somebody who reaches for his pistol when he hears the word "literature." I am interested in sf and fantasy that aspires to do more than tease your money out of your wallet. I like works that challenge but don't drive the reader away. I think that sf and fantasy have histories and premises that give them some peculiar properties, but I also think that they are not, except in extraordinary circumstances, exempt from the standards I'd apply to any work of literature. What standards? That's a matter of debate. It's what writers, fans, college professors and reviewers talk about when they talk about books.

Finally, I think all judgments of books are relative to the context they were written from and the context from which they're being read. This doesn't mean such judgments are impossible. A literary essay is an argument, or an exploration. I hope to make some persuasive arguments, but just as often I'll expect to ask questions whose answers I don't know. I have had my mind changed in the past about many things and expect to have it changed in the future.

* * *

Those of us who have strong political opinions — and who doesn't, about some things at least? — can get into trouble when we set out to write fiction that expresses these seem-to-be capital-T Truths. The ideological novel runs the risk of cutting its reality to fit its ideology. Such books can be interesting as case studies, but in general it's no more fun to read such stories than it is to read literary criticism that judges a work according to whether the characters belong to the critic's political party.

On the other hand, a work without any ideological implications is an impossibility. To the extent that the author tries to "just entertain" he accepts the status quo. His politics come out unconsciously. It can be hard to see this when the book is written, but years later its unexamined assumptions stand out like the incidental racism in 1930's Hollywood comedies.

Avoiding preachment without abandoning thought is hard. Characters and events must seem real without seeming doctrinaire; issues must arise out of the story instead of being imposed on it. The temptation to insert Jubal Harshaw to give a friendly lecture on proper conduct can be enormous. By this standard I'd say Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* is the best

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political sf novel I've read in years, because for the most part it doesn't seem to be about politics at all.

The title is a translation of the main character's name, Zhang Zhong Shan, a young engineer in a U.S. dominated by a hugely successful marxist China. His name is part of Zhang's problem, the Chinese equivalent of being named George Washington Jones (and a subtle poke at Heinlein's heroes from Daniel Boone Davis to Thomas Paine Bartlett). Add to this the fact that he's gay in a New York where homosexuality is punishable by death, that he's only half-Asian (his mother was Hispanic but his parents had his genes altered to suppress his ancestry), and that he loses his place in the socialist labor system, and Zhang has a few things to worry about.

Like Dos Passos's *USA*, the novel jumps back and forth between Zhang and a half dozen other characters tangentially related to him. A young Chinese-American woman suffers because she isn't beautiful, and then suffers after she has been genetically altered to become beautiful. A no-nonsense settler on Mars enters a marriage of convenience with the fixit man father of a young girl. A female kite racer negotiates the demimonde of New York. The novel's political and social changes are expertly laid into the background, and the events range from comedy to adventure to tragedy without violating a sense of ordinary life.

In the course of telling its many stories the novel examines many kinds of politics, from social to sexual. Though the characters touch each other only in passing, they are all searching for identity. McHugh handles the Chinese socialism of her milieu deftly. Characters refer to the awful lives of the "undesignated" in the managed labor market, to the dangers gays run in this society, to the social pressures of life in a commune on Mars, but the society McHugh presents also offers a degree of economic justice unavailable in a free market capitalist system. Her Chinese-dominated world has not become some *1984* horror; it's neither a monolithic totalitarian nightmare nor a glass and porcelain shopping-mall utopia.

Zhang's loss of his job, his eventual move to China to study engineering, his sex life and political struggles, provide the spine of the book. This is a novel about ambivalence. Zhang is gay in a straight world, looks Chinese but is half Hispanic, has a foolishly heroic Chinese name and a secret Latino one, is comfortable in New York City but moves to Shanghai, and works within a Marxist system

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whose injustices he recognizes and delusions he resists. The resistance is in small things, often in secret. The novel recognizes that surviving in a society where one doesn't fit often involves wearing masks. Instead of building her novel around some patriotic struggle of an underground against the communist tyranny, McHugh evokes remarkable levels of tension simply by having characters ask Zhang when he's going to get married. Just as we must today, Zhang has to deal with the pressures of social custom, peer expectations, personal doubt, legal strictures, economic necessity and physical limitation to come to an accommodation with a world that he concludes is a chaotic system sensitively dependent on initial conditions.

In the course of his training in China, Zhang learns Zen Engineering, an episode central to the issues I've been discussing here. Zen engineering is design that uses intellect as the training ground but relies on the "not-doing" of Taoist philosophy to supply form. The world is too multifarious for a rational process to create an environment that conforms perfectly to the person. This can only be done by an intuitive leap. In his personal life Zhang goes through this process to come to a place he creates out of the available materials, using luck, chance, desire, planning and accident. And at the end of the book the characters are not "home free" but participating in an ongoing process.

China Mountain Zhang is positive without sentimentality. It coheres without a genre plot. Its prose is clean and evocative; it expertly handles multiple first person viewpoints. This is a science fiction novel that tells us that the future is not predictable, in the course of which giving us a future as solid as our present. I recommend it highly.

Michael Bishop's latest begins as a funny meditation on pop vs. high culture. Xavier Thaxton, Nietzsche-loving culture critic for a newspaper in a southern metropolis that's clearly a stand-in for Atlanta, is accidentally exposed to radioactive waste that eventually turns him into the comic-book hero Count Geiger.

In the end, however, Bishop turns serious, essays tragedy. Like Charly Gordon's in *Flowers for Algernon*, Thaxton's career describes an arc as unalterable as the parabola of a missile, rising (in this case) from more or less normal human, through superman, only to fall precipitously back to mortality. The effects of these changes on his life, and their philosophical implications, might compromise the substance of the book except for the

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fact that along the way we are treated to digressions on fashion design, rock music, the modern comic book, backwoods dramatic festivals, radioactive waste toting bubbas, and the once pitiful, now formidable Atlanta Braves. In other words, Bishop hangs a lot of ornaments from this gravity's rainbow, not all of them borrowed from the same tree. An action plot. Quirky minor characters. Kinky sex. Sideswipes at the NRA and J. Danforth Quayle. Strippers attacked with squirtguns full of beer. Debates between high and low culture. Greedy capitalists. Backwoods car thieves. Heroism and villainy.

Don't get me wrong; this is probably Michael Bishop's most amusing book, but the book's comic moves obscure what I think is a fundamental question: is Xavier a figure of fun or a tragic hero? *Count Geiger's* ungainly plot, I think, reflects Bishop's ambivalence on this question. The first third spritzes along lightly, full of knockabout surprises, without really taking any particular direction or heft as Zavier battles the "Philistine Syndrome": that is, every time he's exposed to a piece of high art he gets violently ill, and must rush to a piece of trash art to be cured. This provides lots of fun at Xavier's expense. It also sparks a debate between Xavier, his girlfriend Bari Carlisle, and his nephew Mick about what constitutes trash. Is trash in the eye of the beholder, or are there absolute standards? For Xavier, a lover of high art, the answer is self evident, but Bari, a fashion designer who likes soap operas, and Mick, a fan of just about every form of pop culture Xavier finds meritricious, have other opinions. The debate gets complicated when Xavier, against his better judgment, begins to like Mick's thrash-rock. Sprinkle the debates with doses of Nietzsche, generational conflict, and sex and the book chugs along nicely.

Until phase two, which begins when Xavier discovers that wearing a comic hero's uniform will counteract the philistine syndrome. Soon after, he develops real superpowers and we're off into the world of comic-bookdom. Xavier collars muggers, karate-chops bullets out of midair, and preaches refinement to the owners of strip joints. During this section Bishop raises a few practical problems about the life of the superhero that never get addressed in comic books, such as what it's like to wear a body stocking under a full suit of clothes in the high heat of a southern summer.

In phase three, the story turns to the deadly hazards of radioactive waste and the criminal acts of its dumpers, and the novel get serious.

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The issues here are not funny, and the destruction done to naive bystanders is real. And as soon as that plot is resolved, in its abrupt conclusion the novel veers toward tragedy.

This haphazard storyline, unlike anything I've seen from Bishop before, reflects an uneasiness that undercuts the fun. Comedy is certainly a new tone from Bishop, and he demonstrates a talent for it. *Count Geiger's* ungainly cacaphony is a bus ride with a symphony orchestra, Spiderman, a philosophy professor and the Talking Heads from Disneyworld to the MOMA by way of backwoods Georgia. But it seems to me Bishop doesn't really want to write comedy. It's as if Bishop's running riffs on whatever wacky ideas come to hand, without much plan, holding his characters at arm's length; as if, trying to avoid sententiousness, he has to avoid caring — but in the end can't. The result being a loose, baggy sort of book.

Xavier's plight strikes me as an intriguing metaphor for that of the literarily ambitious sf writer — the high culture aspirant wearing a foolish superhero costume under his street clothes. This has been Michael Bishop's career. He's a fundamentally serious writer, aspiring to the highest levels of art, working in a genre considered by the Xavier Thaxtons of the *New York Review of Books* to be at best a small step above comic books. *Count Geiger* is Bishop's debate with himself. To the extent he tries for literature with the big "L" he offends the sf audience. To the extent he panders to that audience, he risks self-contempt. I wish I knew the way out of this dilemma. It seems to me the comic novel does offer a direction, but the path is stony and the light uncertain, and at least in this book the opposing impulses don't seem balanced.

Count Geiger does take us at least partway there. Though the arguments between Xavier, who is really quite pompous, and Mick, who is really quite a philistine, are in the end unresolved, the novel suggests that the fascination of comic books with larger-than-life superheroes, rather than being a weakness of comics, is a tragic commentary on the real world. Bishop tries to move into Metropolis and give us a superhero anyway, but it's clear he doesn't believe in superheroes and lives in that real (if painful) world, so that the more seriously he treats his material the more clearly *Count Geiger* turns toward the blues.

Like Bishop, Gene Wolfe is a writer who aspires to the highest art, and who has taken his own road to writing difficult works within the

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genre. It has not guaranteed him popularity. As a member of a science fiction club in the late seventies, I took part in a ballot to select the guest of honor at an sf convention. I nominated Gene Wolfe. When the ballots were counted, he received one vote (my own). The person in charge of reading the results, coming to Wolfe's name, asked "Who's she?"

Since then Wolfe has done a little better. Whether he's widely popular I don't know. I have taught several of Wolfe's works in classes to college students, and most of them prefer a Heinlein or a Niven, but there are always a couple in every class who go Gene Wolfe crazy. Those who like Gene Wolfe, *like* Gene Wolfe, to the point of obsession. Though he may not have gained wide popularity, he has developed a cult following.

Why is this? For one thing, Wolfe teases, mystifies. His books are often as much puzzles as stories. He appeals to those of us who think of the world as a mysterious place; this can work on levels as direct as the story's plot and as subtle as its metaphysics. In addition, writers tend to like Wolfe's work in much greater proportion than readers; he has been described (not always in praise) as a writers' writer. What is a writers' writer? One answer is that it's someone who does things whose difficulty only a writer could know. Usually this involves technical proficiency, mastery of the language. Both of these Wolfe has in spades. Like stage magicians writers can often be entertained by sheer technique, and Wolfe is a magician who can do slight of hand well enough to dazzle even his fellow illusionists. But readers who are not interested in the writer's moves, who want resolution in plot and certainty in morality, can find this frustrating in the extreme.

Lately I've been thinking about the characters who stand at the heart of most Wolfe stories, his ambiguous protagonists. The classic Wolfe hero is, is in a queer way, invisible. We may see his actions, receive his perceptions, even overhear his thoughts, but his soul is veiled. There are secrets. Latro, the narrator of *Soldier of the Mist*, can't remember anything longer than twelve hours. His personality is discernable only by inference through his mute actions and the reactions of others, but these reactions are not always reliable, or the narrator may be mistaken or deluded, or even when not mistaken may not always be telling the truth. And besides, the wench is dead. Even when the narrator has perfect memory, like Severian in *The Book of the New Sun*, we cannot be sure what kind of person he is. He tells

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us what he does or sees, but seldom what he thinks, and when we get that the effect is ambiguous. The surface of the narrative is clear as glass, solid as stone, yet in the end what do we know for sure? The hero exists in a moral vacuum. Or rather, his personality is like the position or momentum of a subatomic particle in the Heisenberg theory, discernible only through interaction or inference. Ultimately unknowable. Mute despite the fact he may, like Severian, talk to us through four volumes.

Patera Silk, the protagonist of *Nightside the Long Sun*, is Wolfe's latest example. The novel, the first part of a new tetraology, is set in a far future starship of such immense size that its dimensions and shape are only vaguely apparent. Part of the interest of this book, as in *The Book of the New Sun*, is the gradual, incidental unfolding of this background.

Silk is a young priest of a religion that seems like a cross between hierarchical Catholicism and pagan worship, with animal sacrifices and hints of active gods. When his slum church in the holy city of Viron is bought by a shady character named Blood, Silk sets out to save it. The events of this book cover a couple of days of his efforts, involving break-ins, a murder in a whore house, possessions, negotiations and deceptions, all of which Silk turns out to have more talent at than is apparent from appearances. There are hints of political machinations in which Silk is destined to play an important role, tantalizing evidences of decayed technology, glimpses of the extent of this vast O'Neill-colony style spaceship, mysterious references to the gods who appear on old TV screens, of characters being "accepted into the mainframe," and of the Outsider who stands behind them all.

Like the individual volumes of *The Book of the New Sun*, this is not a book that stands alone. There is plenty to entertain and intrigue here, though no conclusion. Like Severian and Latro, Silk is a character whose import is not easily read. There is more to him than it seems.

We shall have to wait until the next book to find out what happens, but I suspect even then what we make of Patera Silk will be a matter of our own reflection off his ambiguous surface. We will pass through his busy world, see many things, hear hints of still others, perhaps labor to piece fragments together into a coherent whole, but never come to a state of complete knowledge. Silk will remain, as do real people, a fundamental mystery, his motives ambiguous, even to himself.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Annie Dalton, *Out of the Ordinary* (Harper Trophy, paper, 273pp, $3.95)

MOLLY IS A young teenager limping along through the greyness of life in the just-above-poverty level that seems to be the predominant social class in England in recent years. Her younger brother escapes by living inside his science fiction computer games; her mother is either gone at work or exhausted from work, leaving Molly, not as a hopelssly overworked Cinderella, but certainly as the caretaker of the house, with plenty of responsibility and little freedom or prospect of change.

And change is what she longs for. So she lives on daydreams until the day that one such daydream prompts her to write down a whimsical "position-wanted" ad: "Capable resourceful girl, good with children and animals. Can cook plain food. Quests undertaken. Lost things found. Enchantments broken. Danger no deterrent. Very reliable." Having written it, though, she realizes with bitterness that reality will never match the dream, and burns the paper.

As you can guess, of course, somebody receives the message anyway (a conscious nod to *Mary Poppins*, I'm sure, just as there's a nod to *A Christmas Carol* when three strange visitors make unusual entrances) and Molly finds herself entrusted with the care of a small wordless boy with a gift for music who seems to be the target of some ruthless would-be abductors from another world. Keeping him safe isn't easy, and she finds and learns to rely on friends. But still it's her own wit and courage (and her own mistakes) that drive the book.

In some ways the book is traditional young adult adventure fiction, and these days it's hardly a twist when the protagonist is a girl. Yet Dalton manages to work the traditional clay into some new shapes, without ever having to raise

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her protagonist out of her bleak working class environment. This is not a book in which the reader can fantasize about someone suddenly discovering his or her true noble or royal identity. Molly is at the end in basically the same situation she was in at the beginning — except that now she has tasted some genuine excitement and accomplished something a lot more meaningful than the housework, and that makes all the difference.

A minor thing, but worth mentioning, is the fact that Dalton repeatedly shows that Molly loathes science fiction. It happens often enough, and with such dark loathing, that I think I can be forgiven for supposing that Dalton is using her viewpoint character to express her own attitudes. The obsessiveness of this desire to put down another genre is not one of the virtues of this otherwise admirable young adult novel — I'm always puzzled by writers who seem to feel threatened by the popularity of fiction that they happen not to enjoy personally. But given how often I've sat in SFWA meetings and listened to utterly pinheaded diatribes by hard-sf writers about how fantasy is "polluting" science fiction, I suppose it's only right to have to listen to a few equally bigoted and ignorant snipings from the other side. It certainly doesn't stop this book from being a pleasure to read, and I daresay that fantasy readers who actively detest science fiction will read those same passages with malicious delight.

Jack Hitt, with Lawrence Block, Sara Caudwell, Tony Hillerman, Peter Lovesey, and Donald E. Westlake, *The Perfect Murder* (Harper, paper, 243pp, $4.99)

This book certainly *isn't* a mystery novel — it doesn't even have a plot, properly speaking. In fact, it's not a novel at all, it's a . . . it's an *artifact* yes, that's the ticket . . . .

Jack Hitt, an editor at *Harper's* magazine, launched the project by writing to each of the five noted mystery writers listed above. He wrote, not as Jack Hitt, of course, but rather as an arrogant and obnoxiously erudite man who had determined to murder his wife and will gladly pay an obscene sum of money for a foolproof plot to kill her in such a way that he will definitely get away with it. If the plot can also contrive to frame his wife's lover, so much the better; and, of course, he would prefer it if the murder could be arranged in such a way that his wife will *know* why it is she's dying — though no one else will. These last features, though, are optional. The main thing is to have her dead, keep her

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money, and stay out of jail.

The five writers all come up with fascinating (though generally outrageous) murder plots that he can use. Only then does he let the writers know that it was not an exclusive assignment (though I assume, of course, that in the real world Jack Hitt acutally informed the writers all along), and he asks each of them to critique the others' murder plots and persuade him why he should choose *their* plot.

It's delicious fun, especially when reading the snide attacks the writers make on each others work. Of course, everyone is posing, so one can assume that the more vicious the personal remarks, the better friends the writers actually are. Lots of good fun. There are only two problems with this book: First, Jack Hitt just isn't as good a writer as the others — he obviously has not mastered the art of making a narrator both repulsive and fascinating at the same time. Therefore the sections written by the purported "murderer" are tedious and annoying to read — you keep hoping that one of the writers will tell him that they have contacted his wife and are providing *her* with plots to kill *him*. The second problem is that with the plots laid bare like this, without the trappings of character and milieu, and without the suspense of the detective uncovering clues until the puzzle is solved, it becomes apparent how ludicrous most mystery plots are. All of them are long on theatricality and short on believability, and it made me suspicious of all the other mystery novels I had read — was I being fooled all along?

Yes, I was. But it's still good fun, and if reading this book takes away a little of the luster of a good mystery, I can assure you that the effect is only temporary.

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Urs Frei began writing seriously after high school. He attended Clarion Writers Workshop in East Lansing, Michigan, then went to the University of Toronto and Syracuse University, where he worked his way to an M.A. in English. He now lives in Canada, and has just finished his first novel. "Mrs. Molton's Mr. Molton" is his first professional sale.

MRS. MOLTON'S MR. MOLTON

By Urs Frei

THE TOWN HAD FORGOTten Dolly Molton until the day, a week after her father's burial, that she left the house and came down into Dry River. She had not attended the ceremony, and most had never seen her, though they would put her age at nearly thirty, and none of the women — no men were there — who saw her that Monday evening recognized her. She entered the square when the heat was just falling, and those waiting before the theater or choosing their tables in front of the teahouse stared as she crossed before them, clasping a black purse with both hands. She was tall and very thin, in a white shroudlike dress, as if the rituals of mourning were unknown in her father's house, and regally, or perhaps only nervously, refused to return their gazes. Her identity remained a mystery until a few minutes after she had walked into the Hotel America, printed her name,

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childlike, with an unsteady hand in its register, and ordered the best room.

No one yet knew that she had come to find a husband, or about the mutant in her basement, but no one was inclined to feel kindly toward her. The greedy speculation that had followed the funeral had been based on the assumption that the house was now empty. Later one would remark how carefully she had chosen her time. It was the Monday of the week the miners would return from the desert: she would have the best men to choose from, as many young men as she could want. The married would curse their luck, for even if she was unattractive, even if rumors of incest, or worse, clung to her name, who would not gladly ignore this to be freed from toiling in the desert and become master of that inheritance? The house was three stories, larger than the hotel, on a small hill outside Dry River to the west. The back slope of the hill was terraced and fenced, and every spring a small miracle happened there: a garden, nourished from some mysterious source, brought forth corn, watermelons, sunflowers in the middle of the desert. A humanoid servant was known to guard the fence all night with a shotgun. This robot could be seen the day after Dolly's appearance, the Tuesday, leaning by the gate of the house with the gun dangling in the crook of its arm, staring through its lenslike eyes over the small lake of parasols that had come to watch the furniture be carried by four hired workers out of the house and down to the hotel. On the porch, Dolly nervously supervised. The doors lay open, but all the curtains were drawn, and no matter how one stared and craned, one could see only dimness inside. The headboard, mattress, great chair, table, emerging one by one into the perennial shadowless sun, seemed to leave behind an air of mystery and become merely things.

Since her hopes of marriage were still unknown, the thought was that she must want to sell the house. The truth did not come out until that evening, after she had made herself at home by replacing all the furniture in her hotel suite with her own. Then once again she braved the eyes in the square, crossing to the offices of the *Dry River Beacon* to announce that for the next two weeks, at her temporary address in the Hotel America, she would be accepting applications for her hand in marriage. She did not know that this would make her a butt of jokes, for the Hotel America behind its respectable front belonged to prostitutes and adulterers. The necessities of survival had caused this, for no one could remember a time when Dry River had received visitors. Near the square

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was a park of tree trunks silver with age and lack of bark, and here a section of the old highway was kept clear of sand and in good repair as a playing field; and sometimes a windstorm would expose a mile or more of the highway, and in the course of the day, everyone would come as if to glimpse at its vanishing point the mythical cities of the East Coast. But the only real link was a rail line running straight as a ruler from the stony hills in the northeast to the southwest horizon, on which at irregular intervals, but always at night, trains would storm through the middle of town in a vain attempt to dislodge it. A little more than half the houses were ruins, principally at the outskirts, where the wind protection was least, and a little less than half inhabited. Streets and properties had a merely legal existence, since, between the houses, all distinctions were obliterated by sand. On the west side, nearest to the lonely and commanding house that had belonged to Dolly's father, was a collection of abandoned warehouses, and in a tin-roofed shack attached to one of these, within sight of the house, lived a man who had no name except Ben. He was the only fit man in Dry River who had never earned his living by mining uranium in the desert. No one was quite sure what he did. He bore none of the normal afflictions of idiocy, dwarfism, or blindness, but rather, the word went, a hopeless deformity of character, perhaps related to his father's expulsion from church for exposing himself on the altar. He shared the shack with the widow of a banker named Larson, who, it was believed, had been murdered by his wife and her lover. The body had never been found. But in any case, the moral victory had been the banker's, because in his will he had left most of his fortune to the town; and for his wife, just enough that she and her lover would not have to work, if not working was what they most desired — which it was.

On the Tuesday of Dolly's appearance, he had stopped drinking at dawn and gone to sleep. In the afternoon the widow shook him, and he cursed and slapped at her, but she persisted, avoiding his blows and tugging at his clothes and hair.

"Come on. Come on. Look at what they're doing outside."

He put his head through the door and squinted, but could see only the dim shapes of people moving.

"They're emptying the Molton house," she exclaimed.

"You wake me again, and I'll fucking kill you."

He woke again the next morning feeling that he would soon die, that

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soon he could lie still one morning and wait for the end. But not now. It was too horrible to think of staying like this, when he only needed water. The widow was out. He cursed her and struggled to his feet. The jug he expected to find on the table had vanished. He rummaged blindly under the table and in the corners of the shack among pots and rags. Then the door opened, and the widow, standing there with the jug in one hand and a copy of the *Beacon* in the other, said in a voice filled with outrage and astonishment: "She wants to get *married*."

A few minutes later, Ben emerged from the shack and headed into town, as he did on five mornings of the week. The widow's inarticulate anger followed him, but he seemed oblivious to it. He carried a slice of hard black bread and a handful of pills — pink for protein, violet for vitamins, copper for carbohydrates — which he chewed absently. He was tall and gaunt and wore gray clothes that fell short of his wrists and ankles. He shambled because his boots also did not fit, and with the habitual slouch of his head to avoid the sun, he looked all in all as if he were an idiot. But if one watched him, now and again he would turn up his face, and one knew — by the steadiness, perhaps not intelligence or shrewdness, but at least willfulness of his eyes — that he was not an idiot.

Today he made a detour through the square, crossing covertly in front of the hotel, circling behind it and crossing again, then standing by the doors as if he did not care to be seen. A group of ladies in white dresses were sitting on the porch. He cleared his throat and said: "It's the one with the balcony where she's in." They were silent, but he turned with a satisfied air, as if his statement had been confirmed.

He passed the empty railway station and, on the far side of the tracks, entered a part of town marked more than any other by abandonment and ruin. The desert was admitted through basement windows and empty doors and was piled high as snowdrifts on the sides of houses stripped to their brick skeletons by the wind. He entered one of these, descending a flight of stairs into what had been a cellar. Underneath was a further level: he opened a trap door and descended a second stair into the darkness. Stink engulfed him, but he was used to this, and as his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he saw a familiar square room walled with planks, perfectly austere. Along a wall lay three beds contrived from clothes and foam rubber, and in a far corner, where daylight entered faintly from the ceiling, stood a square table at which the three inhabitants of the room

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played cards. They did not look up as Ben approached. They seemed impossibly old. They were hairless, and their heads and the backs of their hands pink and cancerously cysted.

The moment they finished, they turned and shook hands with Ben and mumbled greetings. Ben took the empty chair, and immediately there was silence again as the four began to play.

The old men were retired miners. This ruin had accompanied their pensions, and they had enlarged the bomb shelter with the intention of never again seeing more of the sun than the light, diffused by curtains and slats, that hovered over their table. Ben was their only link with the outside. They paid him a third of their pensions to bring news, make the fourth in a hand, shop, and once a week remove a bucket of excrement. It meant they had only enough left for food and some alcohol, but it sufficed. As for Ben, it freed him of the widow's purse: he could eat on her money and drink on his own.

He lost miserably. When the game was over, the man across from him shuffled the deck and put it to one side. All three of them looked at Ben.

"What's the news, Ben? We've never seen you play so bad."

"Well, nothing special," said Ben. "Remember I told you old Molton died? Well, his daughter came into town yesterday and set up at the hotel. But it's not what you think," he said hastily. "She's saying she wants to get married."

"And you want to marry her," said the one to Ben's left.

The other two had already begun to nod, and started mildly as Ben flung back his chair and stared as if to find out who had betrayed him. There was a tactful silence while he collected himself, righted the chair, and sat down again. When the cards had been dealt, he managed to say casually:

"What I was wondering was if you guys could help me out."

The others nodded, but as long as they were playing, they did not talk. Ben lost more badly than before, and the man across from him put away the cards with an air of finality and said, "We'll have to settle him down."

"What I was thinking," said Ben, "was if you guys could lend me some money. If I make this work, I'll be rolling in it. I'll pay you back — God, I'll pay you back a hundred times."

"Why do you need it?"

Ben opened his arms. "Look at me. You think I have a chance, looking

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like this? With a dame like that?"

"You've met her, then."

"No, I haven't met her," said Ben. "I just know."

The one to Ben's right, who had been silent since Ben's arrival, patted his hand gently. "I've got what you need," he said in a thin voice, rising carefully. Ben and one of the others took his arms to help him across the room.

"What have you got, Grandpa?" said Ben. "A stash we don't know about?"

The old man knelt on his bed and pushed at the clothes piled behind it. Underneath the pile was a sheet of plywood partly covering a hole in the floor. "Hey, he does," said Ben. In the hole was an iron chest for which he bent over eagerly. Its owner shooed him off with a vigorous knock. After a minute of fumbling with the latches, he opened the trunk.

Been peered. "What is it?" he said, frowining. "Looks like a bunch of clothes."

Many hours later, after dark, he emerged from the ruin and paused in the doorway to adjust his new clothes. They fit better than the old ones had, and what they lacked was hidden by the dark. He had shaved, and his hair had been cut and slicked back so that it shimmered. The full moon irritated his secrecy, but the old men had persuaded him that he could want nothing better.

His hunched daytime shuffle had been replaced by a saunter, and over one shoulder he carried a half-sized guitar that had been lying under the clothes. He had spent the afternoon learning the saunter, a few chords on the guitar, and eventually a pair of love songs the miners had dredged from their memories.

Your eyes, they are as blue
As my love for you is true.

Were they really blue? They had said not to worry. He had found the chords so difficult that only drink had kept him from despair, and still precariously fortified him.

The square was alive with strollers taking advantage of the temperate hours. He murmered greetings and bowed his head when they passed, pleasantly conscious of their surprise. His only pang of uncertainty came

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when he saw no lights in what he took to be Dolly's suite. But a moment later he found her. She was leaning on the balcony in her white dress, gazing onto the moonlit concourse, in a posture that suggested more yearning than aloofness. She seemed to follow him with her eyes before he was halfway across the square or had finished lifting the guitar from his shoulder.

SO IT was through the transfigured Ben Molton that Dry River came in due course to learn about the mutant in Dolly's basement. The wedding announcement not only added fear to his notoriety, it earned him a secret admiration. Relief greeted the news, as the first of the returning miners were learning with astonishment of his success, that Ben was coming into town as usual to drink, and seemed to bear no grudges. At his first return to the tavern, located in the block behind the hotel, he ordered drinks for the house and was rewarded with a congratulatory toast. He wore the same clothes he had worn to court Dolly; his hair was slicked back, his face shaved, and he had the same easy saunter in his walk and voice. To the miners, he called himself, jokingly, "the new King on the Hill," and they laughed and clapped his shoulders and accepted more of his generosity. But later, when they played cards, he became collected and serious and did well enough that when he returned his winnings at the end of the evening, everyone was moved, and he went outside arm in arm with his new friends and drank and sang.

After a time — he did not quite remember how it had happened — he found himself alone. He wandered half-aimlessly, and suddenly, finding himself before it, he burst open the widow's door and caused her to wake with a cry. He did not understand what was happening. She clasped him, berated him for his faithlessness, then burst into tears. He was forced to lie next to her, held implacably even when he had stopped trying to escape. He had done it for her sake, he protested, so that they would have more money, so that she could regain her standing. She made him describe the house. He told her about the glass chandeliers, the cabinets of dark wood — "hardwood," the widow breathed — the weird objects d'art (he repeated Dolly's phrase) and the oil paintings of her ancestors (only, he doubted they were really her ancestors, because she didn't know their names or when they had lived). The widow laughed shrilly. He described the kitchen in which everything operated automatically, the air-condition-

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ing in every room, the inexhaustible water, the plumbing, and above all — he pronounced the phrase liturgically — the television set. It was joined to an enormous bowl that received after sunset, with varying degrees of clarity, the signals from the coastal cities. Then, as an afterthought, he mentioned the mutant in the basement, forgetting that Dolly had made him promise never, ever to speak of this to anyone. The widow pressed him, and he was powerless just then to resist her. Yes, he mumbled, there was something strange about it. Dolly had said it was the reason there was a television receiver, power to run the house, water for the garden. Supposedly, it had even made the robot. He really didn't understand what she meant. Once a day she took an ampoule of liquid down to feed it, and that was really all he knew.

He felt a little faint at the thought that he had broken his promise, but was soon absolved by sleep.

For the five days when the miners were expected back, the square was decorated with old purple streamers and spangled signs reading Welcome Back. A few of the younger miners, the regions mined by their fathers having been exhausted, had taken to the rails in small groups with hand-driven trolley carts constructed from the wrecks of trains, to explore untouched regions of the desert; but most of those returning came singly and on foot. In spite of the efforts of the welcoming committee, the first day of every miner's return was like the arrival of a stranger. In their weeks away, the miners seemed to have made a compact with the desert, and one saw in their faces the wide, stony spaces in which they had lived. The women preoccupied themselves ignoring the silence that returned their talk.

On the fifth day, the Sunday, the train arrived from the east as it did four times every year. The sober, silent company on the station platform could hear it long before it appeared. Each man stood like a solitary guard of the precious sack between his feet. On the other side of the tracks stood the women, children, misfits and wealthier elders, the bankers and storekeepers. Only the mayor and sheriff, the official welcoming party, were allowed on the platform with the miners. A few of the children pressed their ears to the rails and claimed to be able to hear the train, and jumped and pointed when it showed tinily on the horizon. But as its roaring began to shake the ground, the women retreated and took their

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wards. This was Dry River's business day, and did not belong to them.

The last nine of the ten cars, containing supplies and currency, concerned only the bankers and storekeepers. From the first came armed men in gray coveralls marked with smaller versions of the markings on the sides of the cars, a stenciled *U.S. Gov't* and an American flag. A man in a blue uniform also emerged from this car and shook hands with the mayor and sheriff. They conversed while the others set up for business, carrying tables to one end of the platform, behind which the miners unhurriedly lined up. Each table held a calculator, a scale, and an electronic Geiger counter. The men in gray suits put on gloves and lead vests, and as the miners lifted their packs onto the sclaes, they marked the weights and circled the packs with their counters, recording the readings each time they changed, made a final calculation of all the readings, and recorded the value of the uranium on a sheet of paper that had to be signed by the man in the blue uniform, who hovered behind the tables, and the miner himself. Finally the mayor recorded the sum in a ledger, for a fifth of each man's earnings belonged to the town.

No one and nothing broke the silence except the whirring of the counters, to which everyone coldly and secretively listened, waiting for the two or three times that it would rise in pitch, and to note the identities of the miners whose sacks had caused this. Everyone knew that the richest miners of one season were the ones with the least chance of returning the next.

From her living room window, Dolly Molton could see the train. Her husband, woken by its roar, came down in his underwear, approached her from behind, kissed her hair, and grasped her thin buttocks. She stood like a statue.

"You're not still sore, are you?" he said.

Dolly folded her arms.

"Jesus," he said. He looked at the train. "Anything there for us?"

Dolly nodded.

"Real food, like you were saying? Meat? Vegetables?"

"Yes."

"Oh Lord." He collapsed into a chair and put his hands to his face as if the intensity of his anticipation had changed it into grief. "Oh Lord."

Dolly left the house and sat on the front steps with her arms folded around her knees. Normally she did not care to be outside, but she

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remained the rest of the afternoon and did not move. It had begun to go wrong from the very beginning. She had imagined the splendor of her wedding, how the whole town would crowd into the church to see it. But Ben had insisted it be done at once, and they had roused the pastor just as he was going to bed. He had performed the ceremony in his kitchen with only his sour-faced wife in her dressing gown as witness. Even then, no man had seemed to her more gracious and decisive, and she had been in love. She was sure it must be love. At sunset, Ben came out and spoke to her, but she closed her eyes and swayed back and forth to shut out his voice. When he had gone back in, she saw a man in a blue uniform coming up the hill toward the house. He took off his hat as he ascended the steps and held out his hand.

"Can we talk somewhere, Miss — I beg your pardon — Mrs. Molton?" he said. "By ourselves."

Dolly put her head inside and listened.

"It's fine," she said. "He's watching TV. He won't bother us."

She turned on a light in the living room, and they sat on opposite sides of a table under the portrait of a bearded ancestor. The man in the uniform laid his hat carefully on the table. He seemed uncertain how to begin. She had known his pale, hard, hairless face since her childhood, from the four days every year when he had sat at this table talking with her father. She had brought them wine and food, and he had never spoken a word to her. Nor had she ever listened to what they said to each other, she was so estranged from their world. She felt exceedingly out of place now.

"I was going to bring the food for — what do you call it? Do you have a name for it?" he said, and Dolly shook her head. "We'll bring it tomorrow, along with everything else."

Dolly waited for what he had come to say.

"I was sorry to hear about your father's death. And that you'd got married — I mean I'm happy for you — I just mean, it's made things a little awkward."

She looked blank.

"Did you know that everyone knows about —?" He pointed down.

Dolly colored. "No," she said, adding defensively: "I told him not to tell."

"I'm sure you did," the man in the uniform reassured her. "Dolly, what I want to know is this: how much did your father ever tell you?"

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The only reason this town exists is that thing in your basement

"About what?"

"The thing — mutant — whatever you call it. Did he say anything before he died?"

"No," said Dolly. "He never talked to me unless he wanted me to do something."

"So all you know is how to feed it."

"Well, I know it can do just about anything you want it to."

The man in the uniform seemed to change the subject. "Have you ever wondered why your family is privileged over everyone else in Dry River?"

Dolly looked uneasy. "We're born that way."

He smiled. "Sure you are. But why you? Why are you born this way and everyone else that way? I'll tell you." He leaned forward, nodding and striking the table with his finger. "The only reason this town exists is that thing in your basement. The uranium mining" — he waved his hand contemptuously — "the government mines aren't running *that* dry. Now listen carefully."

Dolly listened. At once she felt bewildered and astonished, for he began by telling her the most outlandish things, in a manner that showed that he thought she already knew them. At first she thought he must be referring to some foreign land and simply was not making himself clear. But no, he meant that here, this very place, this entire desert, had once been alive with cities and forests and rivers, in the time of her great-grandfather still. She had never heard of her great-grandfather, and it seemed improbable that there could be any close connection between herself and this mythical creature. There had been a change of climate and a war. He was speaking much too quickly for her to follow, and she was confounded by this illumination of her ignorance.

"You know what happened then, I suppose," he said. "Have you heard of Project Noah?"

Dolly shook her head, and he nodded with satisfaction.

"Good. We've done our best to suppress it — a little here, a little there. So let me explain. Project Noah was based on the recognition that human progress and achievement were all over on this planet. We'd made a mess

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of things, you might say, but there was still a chance to get off, go somewhere else. So twenty-four ships were built, the pinnacle of technology, every one a self-enclosed world for five hundred people that would last a thousand years. They were launched at the same time from twenty-four points on the continent. Everyone on the planet was watching, and when the ships were outside the atmosphere, every one exploded, one after the other. The greatest disaster of all time."

He paused heavily. Dolly's expression had not changed, and he had the impression that she was not even listening. He reached forward and tapped her hand impatiently.

"It took twenty-four seconds. It was perfectly timed. It was sabotage, of course. This is the part that concerns you. For the project to get off the ground, one big problem had to be taken care of. In principle, they knew how to build everything, but the technology to build it didn't exist. It would have taken hundreds of years. But there was a very simple solution, and that was to make creatures, human beings, that could build it. You see, no computer can match the brain, but it has to be used the right way — and nothing can match the human hand for dexterity — it just had to be made stronger. Do you see what I'm getting at? So they engineered these creatures, twenty-four in all, for their hands and brains, but just to be safe, so that they could control them, didn't give them eyes, or a nose, or a mouth, just hearing and touch — you follow me now? — just a hole for breathing, and baby legs. Sex organs couldn't be helped. Maybe that was where they went wrong. They even made sure none of them would know the rest; they put them all over the continent to make sure. But they must have known, they must have talked after all, because how else would those ships have exploded together the way they did? No one knows how. Now, supposedly all the mutants were destroyed afterward, but in fact they left one, and we've kept it a secret ever since. It's our only hope, and we had to prove that we could control it. I hope you're following me."

"I think so," said Dolly. As he had been speaking, an imperceptible change came over her, as when a sleeper, without a muscle having shifted in her face, can be seen to have woken. Yet she spoke slowly, as if she were still asleep. "You're saying that we risk our lives every day that we spend in this house."

"No, no, not at all," he said, but with the slightest uneasy movement of his eyes. "Not now. Your great-grandfather would have known that he was

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taking a risk, but not anymore. An implant was placed in its brain to prevent it from performing any action without being ordered to. It wasn't clear then that the operation was successful, but we think it's clear now. I think we've shown that we can control it. I think we're ready to tell the public about it. But *we* have to be the ones to tell it. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Dolly shook her head, and once again he felt as if she had hardly been listening.

"Please pay attention. The whole thing is still a political bombshell. Those explosions are a legend. So if people hear about the mutant from anyone except us, even if it's only a rumor, it'll be a disaster. No one will trust us."

"So?" said Dolly slowly.

"We're counting on you. All you have to do is let that rumor die. Let your husband see the creature, by all means. Tell him it's your brother, who was born that way, and your mother didn't have the heart to kill him. That's what I suggest. Your success, I might add, will be generously, very generously rewarded."

Still, he felt, to his frustration, that she was not listening. Her expression was absent and seemed to be touched with bitterness. She spoke suddenly, as if to herself. "So he told, did he? I wonder who he told it to. And what he got for it." She listened into the house and faintly heard her husband laughing. Slowly, she seemed to become aware of her visitor again. "I think I know what to do," she said.

"Would you care to share your plan with me, Mrs. Molton?" he said, taking his hat.

Dolly shook her head.

THE TOWN began to be interested in Ben Molton's absence three days after the train had left. On that day the widow Larson went to the sheriff and declared that Ben had been murdered by his wife. The sheriff did not believe her, and asked for evidence. The widow replied that Ben's absence was all the evidence he should need. The sheriff replied that at this point his absence was evidence only of his absence, and that if she intended to accuse someone of murder on such grounds, he would consider that person justified in suing for libel. The widow said that Ben had promised to come by two days ago, and when she

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had gone to the Molton place last night to look in the windows, she had seen Dolly but not him. The sheriff said that if he were in Ben's place, it would be a year before anyone saw him; and as for peeping in other people's windows —

He assumed that she had no authority, and was astonished when she returned later in the day with a small crowd. Somehow he had forgotten how much the Moltons were disliked, and how much hope there had been, after the old man's death, of plundering that limitless wealth. The spokesman was a storekeeper whom he considered sensible, but who had once lost a battle with Molton over unpaid debts. He was both bashful and assertive. They were concerned about goings-on at the Molton place —not just that Ben was missing, but another thing, too, which the sheriff had heard about just as they had. The sheriff slammed his pen down and rose — but he would go *alone*.

He was a phlegmatic man, but considered himself principled, and it was perhaps more than his annoyance at being disturbed that made him secretly determined that no harm would come to Dolly Molton. It was bad enough already, he thought, that that fellow conned her into marrying him, then started that stupid rumor, and was unfaithful to boot. Having been one of only two inhabitants of Dry River — the mayor was the other — whom her father had ever invited into his house, the sheriff had known Dolly since she was young, though after the mother had died and the father's rule had become absolute, he rarely saw her, and only when she was under a command of silence. He had pitied the mother, who had always seemed to be appealing mutely for help, but the daughter's gaze seemed to pass through him and reject all pity in advance. Nonetheless, he felt a kind of responsibility. He did not doubt that she had felt her father's disappointment at the fact that she was not a son, or that he had tried to get a son from her, and it pained and annoyed him to think that even if Molton had admitted to this, he could have done nothing about it.

When Dolly saw him, to his surprise, she smiled brightly, with an extraordinary effect on her thin, pale face.

"Please come in," she said. "We have fresh coffee."

He stepped inside, but declined to go farther, explaining as tactfully as possible why he had come. Would it be possible for Ben to accompany him back?

"Ben left with the train," said Dolly matter-of-factly.

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The sheriff was astounded. "Why? They let him? When is he coming back?"

"He said only that it was for business. He didn't even say when he'd be back."

The sheriff took a moment to absorb this, wondering wildly if she was lying, if the widow was right. But he knew that her father had sometimes gone east.

"Well," he said finally, "There's one other thing. People are talking about something in your basement, and I'm sure some guy at the *Beacon* made it up, but they're attributing it to Ben, so —"

Dolly looked at her hands. "My father never told you, then," she said. "It's my brother." She smiled brilliantly again. "Do come down and see him."

For a week after she had killed and buried her husband, Dolly felt herself reborn. She felt capable of everything, but moved about the house as if she could not tell what she wanted. She polished a few of the bronze plaques in the living room, vacuumed and dusted, polished more plaques and vacuumed again, then swept the porch and decided that it needed a new coat of paint. If there was paint anywhere, it would be in the attic, where normally she would not have dared to go. One could reach it only by pulling a rope attached to a trapdoor in the third-floor ceiling and catch the ladder as it slid through. She did not know whether she could bear its weight, and sweated nervously, anticipating every instant her father's wrath.

She forgot the paint and spent all afternoon there, blissfully, among the remnants of her childhood that spilled from the bottom of a box she had lifted by accident. She had forgotten them so completely that she did not even know they were hers until she saw her own name printed in the bottom corner of a drawing. Not all of them were pleasing, not the pictures of her father, even the one in which his head was cut off with a carving knife, nor the ones she had drawn so carefully of her mother at her request — her pitiful, suffocating mother whose death had been such a relief. But she left these and took the rest, and with her favorites, the ones of sunflowers and the night sky, she flaunted her father's will by putting them on the wall of her room.

But at the end of that week, she began to feel a change she had been

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dreading, for it was as familiar as anything in her life. It was when she had felt this state approach again after the enormous interruption, awakening almost, of her father's death, that she had decided to venture into Dry River to find a husband. Now she did not know what to do. She had no name for it except boredom, but this implied something temporary and contingent: one had to imagine absolute boredom. One could live in such a state, she had found, only by surrendering to it, and so she did as she had done for so many hours, through so many years: she sat by the window of her small room on the second floor and stared in empty fascination westward, across the desert. She wanted not to think, to become a machine idling mindlessly. She scarcely remembered to eat, and the porch remained half-painted. Feeding the mutant was the only thing that still seemed to matter, and afterward she would sit beside him in the fluorescent twilight, among the masses of strange machines, saying and thinking nothing, as if her only reason for being there were that she had no reason to be elsewhere. Mostly she slept, and lived vividly in her dreams.

Yet it was not the same. It was as if some part of her would no longer sink under. In the basement she would feel distinctly — she did not know why — that if only she waited long enough, something would happen, something final, and later she would remember this and be possessed by restlessness. Far in the west, on the horizon, where she had never been, stood outcroppings of rock, ruins, the hulls of spent rockets. She no longer believed what she had always been told, that beyond them was nothing. If this was so, then why would she feel such a longing when she looked that way?

And curiously, her dreams were recalling, reliving almost, the time when she had first begun to know this boredom. It was one of the few times that seemed to her to have really happened, the time during which the monthly bleeding had begun. At first, this had been horrible beyond belief. When she was not doing chores — during which, drowning in shame, she put her mind fiercely to pretending everything was normal —she lay in bed in a rigid stupor, waiting to die. When first the pain in her abdomen, and then the bleeding, stopped, she felt as if she had been reborn into a different world, nobler for having braved death — and at the same time strangely base, above all alone, convinced of her unique shame, and determined to let no one know. When it returned, she felt as if a joke were being played on her, that she was being made to suffer in this ridiculous

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way without being able to feel after all — after she had survived again —that death was imminent. It was then that this dense, dull, invisible wall had begun to materialize between herself and the world.

But the dreams were reminding her how much else had happened while it was taking power. How she had flaunted her father's will! She had been fourteen, and it had come into her head one day that she would see the miners when they returned. She knew nothing about them except the hardships they needed to endure, but for the weeks that remained, she lived in dreams of them. She imagined them as the men she saw late at night on television, keeping the sound turned low so that her father would not hear: men gracious, handsome, well spoken, and decisive. She remembered this with a chill, thinking of how she had been deceived by Ben. Yet now she found herself perversely longing for him again; not for him, she realized, but for that vision she had had of him when he courted her, the creation of some deep, obscure desire.

No, not really for *him* at all. If only she had remembered earlier that the miners had been the same kind of disappointment! It must have felt as unreal then as in the dream now. She had found a black cloak of her mother's and had spent a whole day, the first of the five days of the miners' return, haunting the town square, trying not to be noticed. But it was only the miners, shrunken and coarse, who took no notice of her. At nightfall she did not know what to do, did not want to return home to punishment so soon, with so much restlessness and frustration. She wandered aimlessly, and in the outskirts the impulse possessed her to take off her clothes. She did not quite dare, but stripped what she was wearing under the cloak, hiding by a wall, and filled its generous pockets. Then she walked back through the middle of the town, her heart maddened by the fall of the cloak, walking faster and faster and not daring to look up. When the town was behind her, she began to run, ecstatic at the warmth rising from the sand, until she collapsed to the ground in languorous exhaustion. The lights of Dry River were no brighter than the stars, and the sand by her face was almost visible. The cloak rested heavily on her loins and breasts. But at last she was driven home by cold.

In the years still earlier than this, the basement had been one of the places she liked most. She had been canny enough not to let her father know this, for when he wanted to punish her, he would send her here. She had told the mutant her secrets and her hates and her loneliness, and she

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had not even doubted that he understood. Now, descending the steps to feed him was like descending into that time, and she began to stay afterward out of more than mere inertia, sitting where she had once sat, on the toolbox beside his wheelchair, among the masses of silent machines and the slight, persistent, familiar smell of excrement. His helpless appearance fascinated her again: his slow breathing; the immense bald dome of his head; the hands twice as large as hers, but crippled in appearance because they never moved; and above all the comical, limp phallus that rested between them, the nature of which she finally understood after thrity years of living with the innocence of a child. She was both shy of and intrigued by it. She told him of her father's death and of Ben, and felt a mysterious connection reawaken, like a familiar scent unconsciously apprehended. But when she mentioned the visit of the man in the blue uniform, the connection suddenly became a current, and she was terrified to be so conscious of his rage. His body could scarcely register it, but seemed to smell of his frustrated vengeance.

One day, as she was sitting beside him, she fell asleep. It could not have been long, perhaps five minutes only, but long enough for a vivid dream that recalled detail for detail a dream she had had recurrently when she was fourteen. In this dream she stood in the garden amid stalks of corn taller than herself, the end of which she could not see, nor reach as she walked through the rows. The stalks became a forest, and as she continued, she saw landscapes she had never seen or imagined, hills and mountainsides rich in woods, orchards, vineyards, rivers. She came upon a naked man lying in the road. She thought that he was crippled, but he had only fallen asleep, and sprang to his feet, robust and beautiful, and beckoned her to follow.

She awoke with a start, drowsier than before, her forehead resting on the mutant's shoulder. For some reason she found herself preoccupied with the problem of how the twenty-four mutants had communicated with each other. She felt that if only she could break out of this stupor, she would understand something important, and that something was about to happen, though she had no idea what.

Late in the afternoon the next day, she heard the voices of men outside, and putting her head out a window, saw four of them standing at the foot of the house, one kneeling and shadowing his eyes as if he were

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trying to see between the cracks in the boards over a basement window. They went to another window, then to the back of the house, where they inspected the fence and scuffed at the ground as if they were looking for something. Then they went to the front. She heard their feet on the porch, but they did not knock. After a minute they tried the windows, and she clenched her hands but did not move, listening with outrage to the rattling. Surely they would not break one! But their feet sounded on the steps, and she watched them disappear into Dry River.

After dark she received another visit. She had left the lights off and did not reply to the knocking on her door until the sheriff called out his name. She was relieved, but the sheriff's face was serious, and he came inside directly and shut the door. No one knew that he had come, not even his wife, he said, and there would be more than a little anger if he were found out. But he had to warn her. Public opinion had forced him to issue a search warrant for the house. He would lead the search himself, and he would do his best to ensure that it caused minimal damage and ended as quickly as possible. It would take place sometime the next day. He would delay it as much as possible to give her the time she needed to make preparations concerning her brother. When they did not find a body, he expected they would be digging around the house, but of course there was no reason that should worry her. He said good night, bowed his head as if in apology, and was already closing the door behind him.

Dolly watched it while his footsteps disappeared. She did not know what to do. Her mouth opened and shut slowly, and all she could remember of what he had said was that they would be digging. She tried to remember where she had put the shovel, but had forgotten completely, then saw it before her, where it always was, in the closet behind the door. She clenched it to calm herself, felt the beginnings of paralysis overcome her instead, and realized that if she did not act soon, she would be unable to act at all. She imitated calm, walked out the door and to the back of the house. There she wanted so urgently to scream that she bit her wrist and found relief in the pain.

Now she could not remember where she had buried him. Behind the garden somewhere. She paced frantically from one end of the fence to the other, but it had not been directly by the fence, and she walked out onto the blank sand. Then she knew she was standing on his grave. In a minute she had unearthed him. He seemed unchanged, a little shrunken perhaps,

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but smelling more of the traces of after-shave than of decay. She could feel the gash in his head where she had struck him with the ax, and this made her calm. She was proud of what she had done, but also pitied the limp body lying in her arms, the injured head rolling against the crook of her elbow. And suddenly she knew what to do. She knew exactly; she would settle their suspicions once and for all. Her heart began to pound with an emotion more powerful than fear.

All that night, beginning late in the evening, the town experienced like an incubus the mysterious roar of heavy machinery. One heard with one's bones the registers too deep to be audible, saw them in the shaking of windows and the ghostly motion of doors. One spoke of a train four miles long with the engines of twelve jets, but it never arrived, and when the actual train passed through at three in the morning, it seemed quieter than a toy. It could only mean war. One climbed to the roofs of houses and watched the horizon to see the rumors of it confirmed in the brilliance of its explosions. Parties of men were sent to circle the town and watch for armies, and when one of these returned near midnight with the truth, only its palpable fear granted it belief. The sound was coming from the Molton house. One of them had found the courage to run up to the house and touch it, and he reported that it was shifting on its foundation, that its windows were breaking, that a crack had opened like a fault line from the roof to the basement. For the rest of the night, an armed watch waited at a safe distance from the house, while women and children and idiots were herded into the train station, the Hotel America, and the church and put under guard. Near dawn the roar suddenly rose in pitch and began to decline, and shortly after first light, there was silence. The house tilted distinctly. Under the leadership of the sheriff, the watch began to move toward it.

He felt obscurely responsible for the turn of events, but was still determined to keep his word to Dolly. A hundred feet from the house, he ordered the others to make a circle around it. He would go to the door and see if Dolly would answer. She had at least the right to explain. The nearer he came, the more hopelessly damaged the house seemed. It was indeed split from top to bottom, one side of the crack several inches lower than the other. The porch had almost slipped its foundation, and he felt how the steps were leaning as he took them. He was so much distracted that he

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had reached the door and knocked before he realized that his command was being disobeyed. They had begun to follow, but it was not this that he had noticed, but the murmur of their voices. A man came around the corner of the house, holding a shovel triumphantly over his head, and as he approached the steps, the others came crowding behind him. The man with the shovel began to shout accusingly toward the doorway. The sheriff turned again and saw Dolly there. She was pale with the pallor of sleeplessness. On her dress seemed to be blood, and her look was so intense that its effect was crazed. She ignored the accusations and said, so quietly that only the sheriff could hear: "A little more time. Only a little more."

The house lurched slightly in what the sheriff took for a moment to be its final collapse. Dolly whirled and stared into the gloom, and when she turned back, she was smiling faintly and seemed calm. In any case, there was no time, and he took her arm and drew her back from the door, down the steps, and into his protection. All three windows onto the porch had shattered during the night, and now five men climbed onto it to finish the work with the butts of their rifles. Others took the direct path and walked past the sheriff and into the house.

"They'll regret it," Dolly said close to his ear. To his astonishment, she was holding one hand to her chest, and was prevented by silent laughter from continuing. Then she managed to say: "I told him to burn it down."

Everything happened at once. He had no time to think who she could mean, for before she had finished, he smelled the first smoke and felt a breath of heat. The fire must have been fueled by something more combustible than wood. Already he saw flames deep in the interior of the house, obscured by the clouds of black smoke that had gone before them, and the shapes of men struggling toward the door as if they had been blinded, falling. Already the fire was overtaking them, and the first of the black clouds and the first tongue of flame seemed to come through the door together. And then, calmly, into the middle of the smoke and a wall of heat, unharmed, stepped a naked man.

Ben Molton, the sheriff thought. Then he changed his mind, and changed it again. It *was* Ben Molton, but strangely, uncannily different. He was holding a wheelchair. Why was he naked? And what was he doing? He was crushing the wheelchair between his hands. It bent as easily as if it had been made of cardboard, and when he was finished, he tossed it to

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the bottom of the steps and smiled. His smile was wolfish, enormous, and he simply stood there in his glorious nudity as if fire were something too elementary to fear. He looked at Dolly and seemed to wait for her. She went to the foot of the steps.

"You," she said. "Come down."

He came down. They kissed and embraced. Then Dolly took his hand and led him through the crowd, which opened as if under a spell. Dolly ignored it, her face shining and blind. "Where do they think they're going?" someone said, but nobody knew. As they dwindled to sight, the crowd's attention returned regretfully to the blazing house, and only a few, perhaps only one man, saw Ben lift Dolly and start to run, vanishing rapidly into the enormous and still-obscure western sky.

"Whatever you do, don't wish for a stress-free life with a never ending cash flow!"

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Mary A. Turzillo teaches English at Kent State University. She also writes strange fantasy and science fiction stories which have appeared in Pulphouse, Universe, Tomorrow, *and* Writers of the Future. *She is a founding member of the Cajun Sushi Hamsters from Hell writing workshop in Ohio, where she lives with a teenage son and two gifted cats.*

Alex

By Mary A. Turzillo

When the time comes round again, She leaves Bast on her throne, walks down from Heaven, and hearkens to mortal longings.

CARA PACED NERVOUSLY in the patch of sunshine on her clean linoleum floor, telephone to her ear. Her friend Judith's voice, on the other end of the line, sounded shrill and urgent.

"Tell me you didn't," Judith said. "You met this guy at an Italian-American Club dance, and you invite him over. This is smart? This is safe? Cara, do you watch the news?"

"This is not a blind date," Cara. "He comes to the dances at least once a month and I've seen him at Vitello's Deli. Name's Alex Cacciato. He wrote his telephone number on a napkin —"

"Which you mysteriously can't find."

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"It's in my car. I thought I put it in my bag, but it must be in my car." Actually, Cara had fruitlessly searched her neat little Escort, even under the floor mats and in the seat cracks. But the guy had to be okay. Lived in the neighborhood, Mayfield and Murray Hill, Little Italy. Her territory. A local, or maybe one of the artist types who were moving in, seeking low-rent studios.

"Cara, don't let him in. Say you're sick and don't let him in."

Cara covered the receiver and took three calming breaths. "Judith, I'm thirty-three. The ol' Timex battery is running down. If I'm going to — you know —"

"Get married. Say it."

"— to have a lover, or even any fun, I need to risk. In the mirror this morning, I saw lines around my mouth. Listen, he has this sexy mustache. Green eyes. Buns to die for. He's so cute —"

"So was Ted Bundy."

Cara twisted the phone cord, torn by indecision. Judith had been her friend throughout library school, but Judith lacked Cara's earthy touch. The minute Judith had landed a job, she had moved into a singles complex on Lake Erie. Cara had kept her old-fashioned apartment in Little Italy. Sure, Cara could afford a new place, but she liked the sunny kitchen, the bathroom with the claw-foot tub, the porch where she raised a jungle of spider plants, the landlord's acceptance of her big ginger tom cat.

Should she let Judith talk her out of the date? Alex was due — oh, God, now!

Judith said, "Don't let him in. If he's legit, he'll call again—"

"What if he doesn't? I can't let this one slip away! After Gene —"

"Gene tried to run over your cat."

"An accident. Also, cats aggravated his Epstein-Barr syndrome."

"Gene was a rat. Dumped you because he found a cat hair in his carrot juice."

Cara felt glum. "The guy probably won't turn up, anyway."

"He might. Creeps flock to you like flies to honey. Or rats to garbage."

Cara felt even worse. She looked at her nails, painted two different colors because Claws von Pumpkin had batted the Porcelain Pinkie off the dresser, forcing her to finish with Iceberry Slink. "Gotta be some nice guys out there."

"But you keep ending up with vermin. You're a masochist, girl."

Judith was right. Of course, Judith didn't date, but she read many books about relationships, such as *How to Find an Almost Nice Guy* and *Men Who Make Fun of Women and How to Embarrass Them.*

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"Judith, I gotta do it. There were sparks. Chemistry."

Judith paused, and Cara figured she was lighting a cigarette. "Yeah, chemistry. As in chemical warfare."

The receiver felt hot, slippery as a vibrator that had been running too long.

The doorbell rang.

Without saying good-bye, Cara hung up.

Morituri te salutamus.

He was just as sexy as she had remembered, in a denim shirt, unbuttoned enough to show copper-colored chest hair. "Alex! I hope you're not allergic," said Cara, opening the door wide. "I'm sorry my apartment is so —"

"You think I live in a palace? "Alex squeezed past her into the kitchen.

Shit. Had she left that burned pan in the sink? Had Claws von Pumpkin left a giant turd in the litter box? Not really sure Alex would keep the date, she had tidied up only halfheartedly.

Thank God Claws von P. was outdoors. He always got friendly with visitors who were violently allergic.

Cara scurried after Alex. Oh, shit! Slimy chicken skin in the sink drainer! Smelly tuna in the cat dish! And Alex was peeking into the refigerator.

"It's not um quite ready."

"That's okay. Just wondered what we were having."

Oh no! With her luck, he was a vegetarian! He *was* sort of on the thin side. Wiry, really.

Nice build.

Now, Cara, she scolded, going to bed with this strange man right away would be dangerous.

But lots of fun.

"You're a vegetarian?" she asked.

"What gave you that idea?" He moved bottles around in the refrigerator. Made himself right at home. Still — so cute. Kinky auburn hair, green eyes. His jeans hugged his buns so nice, and the blue shirt stretched over his shoulderblades —

"Nice shirt," she said.

"Thank you. I borrowed it, and guess what? There was a twenty in the pocket. "He ran an experimental finger from her chin to the hollow of her throat. "What's for dinner?"

"It's chicken," she mumbled.

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He yawned. "No, it's pretty brave, with all these STD's going around. But I'm game if you are."

He brushed his cheek against her hair. She held her breath. Delicately, he leaned over and nibbled her neck. Immediately, she felt her panties get wet.

Judith, she thought, see what a slut I am?

In a tiny voice, she said, "You're going too fast."

Alex stepped back and, looking confused, smoothed his mustache.

Lady crowned with hawthorn, Mistress of the white owl, Beloved of the Day Lord, listen to our pleadings.

Alex ate neatly, eyes narrowed with enjoyment, avoiding the broccoli. And he had three helpings of ice cream. "So what do you do when you're not at home?" he asked.

"I'm a bibliothecary."

"You are not! You're a librarian."

Alex worked in security. She relaxed. How could he be a mass murderer? He told anecdotes about the Russos, the family downstairs, then silently gazed at her with dreamy interest. Suddenly he said, "Did you see the 'Geraldo' show about animals who communicate by telepathy?"

"I like it when he does Satanists."

He sniffed her daisy centerpiece. "Claws von Pumpkin is a stupid name for a cat."

"Big orange tom — what else would I call him? Maybe 'Screwdriver?'"

"Sandy," said Alex. "You should call him Sandy. Or Al."

"He won't answer, whatever I call him."

"Cats have feelings. They're very intelligent."

"Sure, I suppose they learn their letters and numbers from watching 'Sesame Street.'"

He licked his ice cream spoon. "And now what?"

Her hormones screamed, Take him! Take him!

A wiser voice said, Screw him on the first date and you'll never see him again.

So she opened the newspaper to the movie schedule.

They saw a show about sharks and jewel thieves. Alex enjoyed the movie so much his eyes glittered. In the quiet parts, when sharks weren't eating people and thieves weren't grabbing the Koh-i-noor diamond, he caressed

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Cara's ear with the tip of his tongue, getting her amethest earring damp.

She liked that.

Turn your bright face upon us, Lady, for our hearts are breaking.

At the door, Cara had a flashbulb-clear vision. Alex wouldn't call her again. He would disappear, because that was the way men were. Easily bored. For some reason, men ony enjoyed one-night stands. If she went to bed with him, he would fade like last summer's suntan. But if she didn't, he would still disappear.

Not only did men not stay with the same woman, they also never got married. Only women got married, not men.

All this stuff in the media about both sexes getting married was just P.R. for the wedding industry. That was why newpapers never printed the photo of the groom, just the bride. When it was necessary to show both the bride and groom, they hired a model.

Children were not really produced by couples. They were decanted in a baby farm in Akron and given false memories of childhood.

Her friend Judith was right. A relationship was not in the cards.

Still, Alex was a fox. As long as he was going to drop her anyway, she deserved one night of bliss.

"Hey, Alex, how about another dish of ice cream?"

He followed her into the apartment, went into the bedroom, and sprawled on the bed.

"Bashful, aren't you?" she said.

Alex looked confused. "Didn't you want —?" He started to rise, but she flung herself on him.

"Oh, get real," she said. They rolled around playfully, nibbling each other's lips, ears, and necks.

He stroked her neck, then attacked the buttons on her blouse, nails catching on the silk.

"Let me," she whispered. He watched her undo the zippers and buttons, his eyes half-closed with sensuality.

She stroked his luxuriant bronze body hair, then brushed herself against him. He leaned into her caress, exciting her.

"Ah. A screamer," he said approvingly.

* * *

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In the night, twice, he woke her, gently biting the back of her neck. It was lovely.

"Don't leave me," she pleaded.

"Oh, I'll be back, in a while." He slipped out of bed. She waited, expecting to hear the toilet flush or the shower run. At length, exhausted and satiated, she dozed off.

Lady whose substance is light, You change all things. Longing or fulfilled, the wisest of us honor You.

And in the morning, Sunday morning, Alex was gone.

He won't call, of course, she told herself, and moped around in a ragged chenille robe, slurping coffee and watching "The Flintstones."

She went through her purse again and found the napkin with Alex's number on it.

The creep!

He had written *her* number on it. Must have gotten it out of the telephone directory.

And yet — he had been a delicious lover. And he used condoms. Call the whole thing an adventure, almost risk-free.

Still another part of her thought, He was sexy, so engagingly direct. If only he would come back, just once!

Toward noon, the doorbell rang.

Cara threw off the old robe and sprinted for the closet. Her red satin kimono wasn't too wrinkled. She threw it on, kicked off the beat-up loafers, fluffed her hair. Makeup? No time! She slapped her cheeks in lieu of rouge and opened the door.

Aw shit.

Judith stood outside, with Claws von Pumpkin draped over one arm.

Judith said, "Look what I found in the basement, lying on the Russos' clean laundry again. And he had a dead rat."

"It's just you," said Cara, defeated.

"Don't tell me you slept with that Alex guy!"

"Judith, shut up."

"What could I expect? Last night was the full moon."

Claws von Pumpkin jumped out of Judith's arms, rubbed his muzzle against Cara's ankles, and sauntered into the bedroom. On the bedstand were

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the melted remains of Alex's fifth dish of ice cream.

Purring avidly, eyes narrowed in ecstasy, Claws licked the dish.

Back in the living room, he settled on Cara's lap to watch "The Flintstones," "Wildlife Chronicle," and later, "Geraldo."

Lady of Light, in the dark of each cycle we await the return of your power.

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Rob Chilson's most recent novel, Rounded with Sleep, *appeared from Warner/Questar. His short stories show up regularly in* Analog, Pulphouse, *and* Amazing. *He last appeared in* F&SF *with the cover story of our May, 1992, issue. "Fetching" is not a science fiction story. It was inspired by a book of Victorian ghost stories. Rob writes, "The British dialect was vetted by a couple of legal aliens: Dave Rowe and Mary Long. They should be mentioned, as much credit is due them."*

Fetching

By Rob Chilson

THAT'S THE LOT, Guv'nor," said the driver.

"Thank you," I said coldly, declining to shake. It wasn't money he wanted; I'd had to pay them before the Larkworthy brothers would unload their lorry.

He grinned cheerfully despite my rebuff. "'My good man,'" he said.

"What?" I corrected myself: "Eh?"

"If you're gonna get that 'oity toity, why not come out with 'my good man'?" he said. Then his grin faded. "I couldn't 'elp but notice them tapestries you got in the Great 'All." He shook his head. "You shouldn't ought to deal with anybody but honest, respectable men in the trade, like Jim and me. Them tapestries was stolen from Joiry Abbey. I reconnized 'em directly I seen 'em, and so did Jim." He shook his head, spat to the side. "It ain't unlikely some of your guests 'ud know 'em by sight too."

He looked at me expectantly.

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"I shall have a word with my agent," I said loftily, peering at him through my new pince-nez and trying to conceal my irritation.

It wasn't the first time Gordon had failed me. An "honest, respectable" agent would not have bought, however cheaply, anything so likely to be "reconnized" — even if the working man in question was an expert on stolen antiques. But Gordon at least treated me with respect.

I was quite touchy about respect.

"If you're quite through —"

"We ain't got 'em h'all in place yet, but they're in the 'ouse," he said.

"I shall see to the placing of the furniture myself," I said.

"Righty-ho, Guv'nor," he said heartily, still with that indefatigable good humor. "Me and Jim'll be going. Hope to do business with you again!"

Not if I knew it.

They crammed themselves into the lorry and pulled out of the courtyard. When the big machine was gone I sighed and looked at the house. Craik House, it still said on the granite lintel in front. It was a huge place with a once-fashionable address just off Hampstead Heath, beginning to become fashionable again. Nobody suspected a thing. It was believable that a scion of "the old Craik family" would buy up the ancient family house and restore it to its former pride.

I went slowly inside.

Five generations of tenants had nearly done for the old place, but the hints of departed grandeur were plain to be seen all around. The house had been cut up into flats, and I'd been tearing out partitions and closing off unneeded doors all spring. I'd got the place pretty well restored to its original floor plan; now I was replacing the old furniture.

"Sir?" Walter Henley, my impeccably English butler. "Three parcels from Mostain and Sons — I took the liberty of signing for them, sir. I have placed them upon the table in the Hall."

"Quite, thank you, Henley."

"And these items, sir — I understood you to wish the bureau to be placed in the North Room and the two chests in the East and Red rooms."

"Quite correct."

"And finally, the antique washstand you wish placed in the alcove of the master bedroom. Was it your intention to have water laid on to it, sir?"

"Yes. It'll have to be altered for that. We'll just have to put it in the alcove till the plumber's mate has been round," I said.

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"Very good."

I went to the Great Hall, quite a grand place now it was restored, to open the parcels from Mostain and Sons, and as I did, I took a good gander at the tapestries. They looked okay to me, but what did I know? The parcels from Mostain and Sons were full of things like old perfume bottles, ancient beach-souvenir boxes with sea shells glued to them, and a set of sterling-silver hair brushes and combs. Looked to be worth about two pounds ten in the Portobello Road, but they'd cost me nearer fifty. Mostain and Sons were legit.

I'd have to change the coat of arms on the brushes, but that would be easy — they were inset ovals that would prise out easily.

Joiry Abbey?

I snapped my fingers. I had an old book on ancient country houses. I left the stuff from Mostain and Sons and hurried to the library.

Yes, there was the book. I put on my pince-nez — they were stiff, and hurt my nose. Yes, and there was Joiry Abbey. There was only one small picture that showed the hangings in the background, and I couldn't be sure that they were the same. But I couldn't be sure they weren't. The text was no help — just said they had "hunting scenes" on them.

I wasn't going to take the chance. I went into my study, closed the door, and called Gordon.

"These hangings," I said. "The 'old Craik tapestries.' They're from Joiry Abbey. You think my upper-crust guests won't notice? They do the tourist thing, you know, go round the old country 'ouses and see how the gentry used to live. Take 'em away and bring me something they're not *quite* so likely to recognize, get me?"

"Oh, come, Mr. Foster —" Gordon said.

"Craik-Foster," I said quickly.

I'd taken the name Foster, and had got phony papers to prove it. I claimed to be of a collateral branch of the Craik family. Then I openly and legally changed my name to Craik-Foster. A perfect cover for the biggest con of my life: going straight.

"I doubt there'll be a problem. 'Oo'd suspect a son of the old Craik family? Besides, anybody that knows the Joiry 'angings'll know they're in storage."

"Don't bet on it — I won't. If you want my business in future —"

"Hey, hey, mate," Gordon said. "No need to spit. We aim to please. So

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if the client's not satisfied, we put it right."

I let myself be mollified and talked into what I wanted — the old hangings out and new ones on their way.

My former life as a con man had given me not only the money to buy my way into this "old family," but the contacts that enabled me to acquire such things as the "Craik tapestries" cheaply. I had plenty of money, but not unlimited sums.

That was one of the things I liked most about the "Craik family" — it came cheap.

It wasn't likely that anybody would read up, as I had done, and find that there *was* no "old Craik family" to restore. There had been one rich uncle in the India-China trade, who'd built Craik House. He'd died childless and the house had gone to a grand-nephew. But the family had never had enough money to more than put up a pretense, and they'd soon sold the house. The main line of it — if it had one — had been extinct, as far as I could tell, for fifty or sixty years.

And if anyone did find out that the Craik family was less than distinguished, they'd never believe that I was in no way related. Who'd go to so much trouble to graft himself onto a family of nobodies? Not unless they already had reason to think I wasn't what I seemed; and the Yard believed I was still on the Continent.

My first soiree, ten days later, went off well. I didn't exactly invite Lilibet and Phil, or even Charles and Di, merely a number of my new legit associates on the Stock Market, and their families. All three of my new partners, of course. There was a scattering of models, actors, artists, and that lot, for spice. Those were young relatives of the business families, or friends of the youngsters.

People were impressed by the Hall, I was gratified to see. The replacement tapestries were up, and the servants apparently had accepted the tale that *these* were the right ones. The tour of Craik House went off well, I rattled off my plans to restore the place, and they were very respectful. The champagne flowed, the music pulsed, people danced, and all in all it was very enjoyable.

I was careful not to drink too much, and I kept Walter Henley under my lee. He'd already taught me more about how a gentleman acts than any school could have done, and just being around him kept my accent from slipping.

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I showed the "family" portraits, and told the "family" history, and pointed out the few pieces of "family" furniture I had been able to locate, and other period pieces that looked just like the family's old furniture, to admiring crowds. I didn't make a single slip.

But this half-naked little tramp from some theater asked me a poser: "How about the family ghost?"

I caught myself just in time. "Eh?" I said, and peered at her through my pince-nez.

She laughed, half full of champagne. "Family ghost, you know. All old families have 'em. Daughters who died in illegitimate childbirth, second sons who murdered first sons—" She made a whimsical *moue* and gesture.

"Yes, yes," said young Tinsley. He was the son of one of my legit partners. "Haven't you got an old ghost hanging about?"

It would more likely be the ghost of some slatternly tenant. I looked round at them, and you know, the whole bloody lot of them *expected* a ghost. Well, you don't get far in my former profession unless you can tell the tale.

"Come back later," I said. "No, seriously, I don't have anything to tell you now, but I'm tracking down a story. There's something mysterious about the family's decline, and a ghost that only appears when there's a member of the family present." I threw that last in should they ask if any of the tenants had seen anything these hundred years.

"I haven't actually seen anything myself, but sometimes — Too much whiskey, I suppose — no, in my case, not *enough* whiskey!"

They laughed and let me off.

The last guest left after midnight, and they all seemed to have enjoyed themselves. Henley came in. I could tell he was tired, because he was more imperturbable than ever.

"Shall we clean up now, sir?"

"Oh, uh, no, Henley. Leave be till morning."

"Thank you, sir. Then I shall say good night."

I said it back to him, and he went out the back door. I didn't know, till I hired him, that butlers ever got married, but he was, and he didn't live on premises. I went off upstairs.

A ghost! I brooded a little. It wasn't as if it had ruined the party or anything like that. But there it was. I'd done everything, everything. I had antique furniture, *real* antiques, not fakes; I'd got in the new tapestries —

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and the portraits, every one of them a genuine antique. You have no idea how many portraits of nobodies there are floating around an old, stable country like Great Britain. These portraits had the right dates and the wrong names on them, but the names corresponded to the dates, by gum. Wherever possible I stuck to the true "family" history, such as it was.

And practically all this, I did all by myself. I had help tracking down the family history, but I alone embroidered it and jazzed it up. And getting all these antiques and "attributing" them to this or that member of the family, all that I did on my owny-oh.

And they wanted ghosts.

By God it was hard. After all I'd done. (Maybe I'd had more to drink than I thought.) I sat on the edge of my four-poster with the crimson velvet curtains open, and almost felt like crying. All I'd done, and it wasn't enough. I'd got to get up a ghost, any road. I went to sleep, brooding over the thought.

NEXT DAY it sounded foolish to me, but I was still brooding over it. And by gum, that ass, young Tinsley, was in the office, and he made a remark about the Craik family ghost. Damn me for telling the tale — I could see they weren't going to let me forget it.

"I still need to research it," I said. What I wanted to say was: Harraway with yer barra! — meaning, Don't be daft, in Newcastle.

I took to doing research in the British Museum — didn't want to bring that kind of book home. Walter Henley was as smart as me. I read up on old ghosts in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland; even found a book on haunted places in the Orkneys. I learned about the Society for Psychical Research, and gave up the idea of faking something; they were too damned good at unmasking hoaxes.

Finally, I made a tentative decision. I'd try the Wilmerding Ghost.

Wilmerding is this village in Kent. It has a tidy, not too large church that's not too old, a neat smallish cemetery, two dozen houses, and no shops. No school, either. That's it — oh, and the ghost.

The ghost is that of a woman accused of infanticide. She usually appears as a grey figure in the twilight, morning or evening, peering pensively down at her tombstone. Often she'll not be recognized as a ghost, she looks so natural, though her skirts are long. The tombstone isn't large. It just says,

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Jane Crashaw and Childe, Bee Heere Ye Reconciled, 1627.

The child of course was illegitimate, and Jane herself no better than she might be. (Irritatingly, nowhere is there mention of the sex of the child.)

Jane was hanged for simple infanticide. Later sensationalists had it that she was a witch, or was accused of being a witch, but that is not so.

Who cared? A pensive grey shadow in long skirts haunting the place would do Tinsley one in the eye, any road, and that little snip from the theater, too. I went to see Gordon and laid it out frankly for him.

"My God, are you crazy?" he said. "Steal a ghost?"

By now I'd got used to the idea and it appealed to my sense of humor. "An *antique* ghost," I said. "You deal in antiques, I believe?"

"You're flippin' crazy, man! Unless it's a joke. Poor taste, if it is."

"Call me crazy. It's no joke." I grinned at him. "Your boys'll have to be very careful. It's a small place, is Wilmerding, and there's three houses not too far from the cemetery." I'd driven through it, but I knew small towns; I hadn't stopped nor made any inquiries. "I'd suggest muffled shovels and no lights."

"*Muffled shovels*! How do you muffle a — You're havin' me on."

I lit a tab and exhaled, enjoying this. "Dig after midnight. And if the ghost shows, be polite and tip your 'at, though they do say as she's no better than she ought to be."

"What makes you think this fetch'll follow its bones, saying there *is* one?" he said.

"Nothing says that. But it's worth a shot, isn't it?"

Well, it took a bit of persuasion, and more money than I could have wished, but Gordon finally came round. Damn him. Should have gone to the Larkworthy brothers; the tapestries should have warned me.

Anyway. It was nine or ten days after I spoke to him before Gordon's man delivered a big parcel marked "Bric-a-brac." I had to sign for it personally and write my cheque on the spot for the balance due. I called Gordon to confirm, as soon as I got it. He'd got over his irritation and chaffed me.

"Your fetch is fetched," he said. "A high-priced lot of old bones, anyway. You have no proof there was a Wilmerding ghost in the first place," he said. "My boys didn't see a thing. Still think its bones'll fetch it?" He chuckled.

"I'll keep you posted," I said, feeling a little irritated. What else was I to do? "Maybe invite you over for a tea with the ghost, by gum."

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"You do that," he said, and hung up, still chuckling.

I banged the phone down, hoping to hell the ghost *would* appear, just to show him.

Henley as always was the last servant out of the house — the housekeeper and her daughter, who gloried in the title "upstairs maid," left early. As soon as Henley was gone, I went down into the sub-cellar — there were two storeys below ground — and raised a flagstone. I'd prepared this in the interim. Here I unwrapped the parcel. Inside was a Robertson's Marmalade box. It was half full of crumbly bones.

They were greyish and yellowish, and all fragments; I couldn't recognize a single bone, not even ribs or a skull. Well, it's been over three hundred sixty years. It looked more like a box of pale gravel, except that the pieces were very light, dry, and obviously fragile. There was an odor of rich brown earth; nothing more.

I shrugged and shoved the parcel into the hollow under the stone, wrappings and all. The flag came crunching down on it solidly and I grouted around it. We'd had to grout around a number of stones down here; nobody would make anything of this one having fresh grouting rather than old mortar.

And so to bed.

I was careful not to force it, said never a word to the servants; nothing people could lay to me as giving them a hint. Three days passed.

Getting impatient, I decided I would go down in the cellar and have a look round, one night after Henley had gone. We'd re-layed the electrics below, putting in fluorescents. Their white glare has to be the most unromantic light ever seen. The thought of ghosts didn't cross my mind as I strode briskly down the two flights of stairs, snapping the switches at each landing.

I marched boldly up to the flagstone and gave it a hard look, then looked around, disappointed. Not a sign of anything, of course. Aimlessly I walked on past it. As I did, I suddenly realized that someone was peering stealthily out of the arched doorway opposite.

I turned quickly. The fluorescents flamed coldly, starkly, revealing nothing whatever. There wasn't a single shadow that was solid; every corner of the cellar was in the direct rays of one light if not two. I was startled, of course. But there was nothing down here but me. Imagination. I started back toward the stairs.

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As I stepped over the flagstone again, I again had a sharp feeling that someone was watching me. At the foot of the stair, I turned frowning to look back. Nothing. But as I stood there, it came to me more and more strongly that I was being watched, that hidden eyes studied my every move. Studied them with cold enmity.

Suddenly it occurred to me that I had arranged the lights in the cellar on a very foolish plan. A master switch at each landing controlled all of the lights on each level, turning them all on simultaneously.

The same switch could turn them all off simultaneously.

I turned and walked as slowly as I could up the stair. Five steps, and I felt that It — whatever It was — had advanced to the foot and was staring up at me. My back crawled, and I was fighting to control both my pace and my breath when I reached the top. Not a thing to be seen, nothing but the worn granite flags. But I had the strongest feeling that *something* had just ducked out of sight and was now gleefully aware that the stair led up. And that I was up there.

I threw the switch, and was appalled by the feeling that *It* was rushing up the stair. I glared in horror into the nest of shadows that the stair had become and convulsively put the lights on again.

Fluorescents do not flash on instantly, as incandescents do. They flickered, flickered, the light bloomed — or as I saw it, the shadows shivered, shivered, then fled down the stairs, vanishing at the foot.

Nothing. Nothing whatever. As the shadows vanished, so had It.

My heart's thunderous beating slowed as I began to get a grip on myself. Curious illusion. In the space of a minute, I'd become convinced that something terrible haunted — there was no better word — my sub-cellar.

Then I realized that it wasn't over. I had a very strong sensation of being watched from the bottom of the stair, though I could see nothing. My God, I thought. Must I go through this *again*?

With a steadfast courage I never knew I had, I pushed the switch again. Again the shadows rushed up the stair, and It with them. It was rather like having a half-rotted skull thrust suddenly into your face.

Instantly I put the lights on again, and again It swayed and struggled with the light, and retreated.

I stood panting. There was yet another flight of stairs to climb, and at the top of them was another switch. If It should somehow get round my back and at that switch —

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I turned, put the lights out again, and walked resolutely away. Halfway up the second flight, walking steadily and perspiring steadily, I had the sensation that It was watching me from the foot of the stairs. Years of telling the tale stood me well. I marched sturdily up.

At the top, my nerve holding by the slenderest of threads, I turned, glanced casually down the stair (I felt It retreat), snapped off the light, and resolutely shut the heavy door. For good measure I threw the lock.

My legs were trembling.

I went straight to the kitchen and found the whiskey bottle. But I hardly needed it. By the time I'd reached the kitchen, my fear was gone. I was still nervous and jumpy, but as I drank, I was already asking myself what brought on this fit of nerves.

The Thing was not greatly troubled by light, I thought. It was my own fear of the dark that made the switch so critical. Curious. No mild-mannered lady in grey. Some demoniac image, no doubt from my subconscious, that seemed to be new to the place and learning how to get about. Now it knew there were people up here, and when it solved the problem of the door. . . .

No — I checked my thoughts. That way lies madness. I finished my whiskey, coughed, drank a swallow of water, and went off to bed. Slept soundly.

Next morning Henley served me my usual, bacon and eggs and toast. "Mr. Craik-Foster, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Linwood asked me to unlock the cellar door this morning. Had you a reason for wishing it locked?"

"Oh, no." I felt rather embarrassed. "That is — The fact is, I was down there last night, and got rather a chill."

"A chill, sir?" He looked at me, with that frozen imperturbability that meant he was startled. It was summer.

"A turn. Fancied I saw — a ghost, or something of the sort." Damn it, I hadn't meant to give the servants any hints to build on. This sunny morning, ghosts seemed ridiculous, the idea of stealing one doubly ridiculous. I laughed like an idiot, trying to sound natural. "It seemed safer to throw the lock, when I'd got back up," I said lamely.

"Ah, I see," he said. God knows what he thought.

Anyway, the day went as usual: off to work, home in the afternoon,

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calling round, moving furniture, ordering articles for the house, pursuing information about the Craiks. I don't think I gave the sub-cellar a second thought. The servants off, a last stint at my desk in the study.

It being summer, the servants were off about sundown. Or so I thought. Henley had looked in to say he was going, and I supposed as usual he had seen the others off. Yet, I realized I wasn't alone in the house. People kept coming and going, and I kept almost hearing their voices. Finally I gave up hope of getting anything further done that night, and went to the kitchen.

If anybody was still here, they'd be in the kitchen. But they weren't. I was alone in the house. — Except, someone looked in the door at me — only when I glanced up inquiringly, no one was there. Then someone walked down the passage beyond the wall — I could almost hear the footfalls.

The old house creaking. Nerves. I was spending too much time alone. Really ought to find someone to share all this splendor with. But now I was respectable, I couldn't just pick up a woman. I had a last drink and went off to bed.

And you know, I had a devil of a time of it, even then. I went to sleep readily enough, and almost at once commenced to dream. I dreamed that someone repulsive and grotesque had bought into my firm and was setting up a massive takeover of the whole market. I was attracted by the possibility, but repelled by the partner. It was agony; I desperately wanted to hear more, but I couldn't stand the speaker.

Then he was an old associate, a repulsive old associate, eagerly telling me of a marvelous con — talking the Crown Jewels out of the Royal Family.

Ever have someone with bad breath, who spits a lot when he speaks, take a liking to you and insist on telling you long tales about his private life. It was like that.

I struggled half awake, feeling that someone was standing beside the bed. I tried to mutter, "They don't *own* the jewels —", but there was no one there. I turned heavily and fell back into sleep.

I dreamed of Craik House completely restored and twice the size it really was, gleaming like one huge carved jewel.

I dreamed of women overflowing Craik House.

I dreamed of myself, elegantly dressed, making my way with measured stride through the heights of society, the admiration of all. My wit and charm were irresistible.

I dreamed of money, bank notes, gold coins, Texas oil wells, South

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African diamond mines, South American cocaine refineries, Japanese factories.

All these things, I could have.

And all the while I dreamed, I was conscious on some level that these promises came from a despicable and repulsive person who stood near me as I slept, whispering, as it were, into my ear. I woke logily and dozed groggily, and woke again. One thing only remained constant: that hateful presence, always near me, except when I looked. It was like a dog howling next door when you're feverish, a sound that threads all through your waking and sleeping, blending them together into hell.

Finally, as I lay with eyes half open, trying to ignore wild schemes for wealth, wild dreams of greatness, they began to fade away, to lose their grip. It got lighter and lighter outside my window, and the predawn illuminated my room with a clear ruthless light that let nothing hide. Whatever it was that had shared my room and my dreams, it went with the night. At last I was able to sleep, and did so till Henley woke me, looking perturbed.

"Mr. Craik-Foster, sir. Time for your breakfast, sir."

I sat up blearily. I felt like hell, and must have looked it. "Right, thanks, Henley."

After an unusually long stumble through the bathroom, I wandered down to the dining room. I felt seedy and miserable, but I was hungry enough for breakfast.

"Call the office, will you, Henley, and tell them I've got a late start. I shall be in later."

He looked at me. "Perhaps I should inform them that you are unwell, sir. Need you go in?"

"Christ, do I look that bad? Right, go ahead, tell them I'm, unwell, caught a chill, whatever."

"Yes, sir."

He went away and presently returned with a fresh pot of tea.

"Henley, do you believe in ghosts?"

I wouldn't give a damn for any butler who isn't English. Henley stopped pouring, *then* shot me a startled glance. Didn't spill a drop.

"Sir?"

I had surprised myself more than I had him. "Er — what I mean is —"

When I checked, he finished filling my cup and said, "Perhaps you refer to your experience in the cellar two nights ago, sir."

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I lit a cigarette and pulled the tea cup closer to me. "Maybe you're right, though I wouldn't call it a ghost, exactly. I remember letting myself get into a, well, a tizzy. You know how you can scare yourself, if you're at all imaginative, even in broad daylight."

"As a small boy, I would frighten myself till I ran panting through the dusk, to slam the door shut behind me," he said.

"Exactly so!" I said. "I suppose that's all it was then. . . . Last night was just bad dreams, but they might have been inspired by the previous night's imagination. I suppose."

"Reasonable enough," he said. "However, these nightmares seem quite to have exhausted you, sir. You should not exert yourself; a day of rest, perhaps a nap, will see you right as rain."

"I shouldn't wonder," I said. And it did, especially the nap.

BY EVENING I had forgotten the "ghost," having got involved in the Craik hunt, as I privately called it. It wasn't until Henley looked in to say that the others had left and to ask, as he always did, if there was anything else I required, that I felt a certain chill. I remembered last night with a clarity that surprised me. It had begun like this: the feeling that I wasn't alone. "With Night comes Fear . . . and Night will soon be here." Nursery rhyme.

"Er — just a moment." I looked down at my desk and battled my pride. "Just to set my mind at rest — after last night, don't you know. . . ."

"Sir?"

"Would you mind, awfully, coming down to the cellar with me?"

He looked almost surprised; one eyebrow quirked slightly. "Why, not at all, sir."

A little nettled, I went briskly and confidently to the cellar door and opened it, flipping the switch as I did so. The lights flickered on. I paused only long enough for them to come to full alertness, then marched down, Henley right with me. Everywhere the long thin fluorescents showed their stark light. The few shadows were thin lifeless things, penetrated through and through by one light or another.

Henley matched my pace and said not a word. Over to the second flight of stairs, the snap of the switch, and on down. All this time I felt not a thing. At the foot of the second flight, in fact, I was feeling a little foolish, but I put a bold face on it, and led him right up to *the* flagstone. I ignored it and

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stood looking around.

Nothing. Henley glanced at me, and also looked round. He stepped to the doorway to the empty wine cellar where I'd thought I'd seen the thing. Nothing.

"Well, sir?"

"Nothing, Henley." I forced a smile. "Thank you for coming down; your sturdy common sense seems to have routed the ghost. That, or my day's rest."

"Undoubtedly the latter, sir."

We turned to go. As we passed the flagstone, Henley glanced back and gripped my arm so hard he bruised me. "Jesus Christ!"

"What? What?"

I whirled round, but didn't see a thing. Henley was pale; bloodless; I've seen dead men who looked healthier. He stared, and I felt his hand shake where he gripped me. Then I had again that sense that I was being watched, that unknown and evil eyes peered round corners at me.

"A-a Thing, sir! A t-terrible Thing!" His gaze met mine, his eye ringed with white. But Henley was a stout fellow. He took a breath and visibly pulled himself together. I saw some of the color come back into his blanched cheek.

"It was there, sir, looking out of the door to the old wine cellar," he whispered. "A thing — manlike, black, hairy — coarse, thin coat of black hair — all twisted and misshaped—"

"Like an ape?" We were both whispering.

"No, like — like a devil. There! There! It darted across — Did you see it? Jesus Christ!"

"No — no! I didn't see a thing!" But I could almost feel its breath. "Why can't I see it?"

"I-I don't know — There! I saw it again — it's gone again. Yellow eyes — like a cat's — a devil's. You didn't see it?"

"Not a thing," I said, scared. Thank God he could see it. "Walt — it's stalking us."

"Right. We got to get out o' this. Come on — make for the stairs—"

We marched carefully toward the stairs, Henley looking back. He stopped me at the foot of the stair.

"There it is, Jack — see it?"

He pointed at it, peering out of the passage, much closer than I had

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thought. Though I could *feel* it, I couldn't see a thing. I explained in a whisper.

"Don't mean it ain't real," he said grimly. "Slow march — steady on!"

And steady on we went, up the stair — leaving the lights on below. "It 'ud rush right up them steps if we was to turn off the light," he said.

"It did last time," I said. "Good job it was weak then, and didn't know its way around."

Up the second flight. I thought they'd never end. Despite having a stout companion, this was worse than the first time. There was no thought of toying with it, or denying that it existed, as I'd done before. I could hear Henley's heavy breathing beside me, and the last half of the way up, he stared at the door as hungrily as I.

I felt a sharp increase of the cold fear it gave me as we reached the top, and we both looked back.

"*It's in the open*," Henley said in a taut murmur, scarcely moving his lips. "Makin' strite for the stair. Let's scarpa!"

We slipped through the door and leaned against it, like small boys.

Then we stepped away from it in alarm; I at least felt strongly that It was just on the other side. Apparently Henley had some sense of that.

"We ain't out of the woods yet, Jack," he whispered, indicating the door.

We went off to the kitchen and got out a bottle. We left the door open so it couldn't come up on us. Thank God he could see it.

"It came out in the open at the end?" I asked, in awe. "What did it look like, Walt? Covered with hair, you said?"

"Yeah. It's awful! Look, mate, that door won't 'old it for long. You ain't safe 'ere tonight." He took a swallow, never taking his eyes off the doorway. "You wasn't reelly safe last night."

"No more I wasn't," I said, remembering — shuddering.

"You'd best come along 'ome with me. The missus'll make you welcome. Deal with *it* tomorrer. 'Ow's it sound, Jack?"

I'd never heard a better proposition.

We closed the back door quietly behind ourselves and slipped over to Henley's Lada. The lights from the cellar shone out from the areaways, looking a bit odd with all the other lights out, but not likely the coppers would take notice. Most important, there was no sign of — It.

As he started his little car, he said suddenly, "Was you at Mountford? In Shropshire? Say, five, six years ago?"

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It took me a bit to drag my mind off the thing in the cellars and throw it back. Finally I remembered an ancestral house on a hill, the Severn gleaming below like a sword blade, flowers and sunshine. I took that family for —

"You were there too, by gum? What name were you going by?"

"Not in your line of work," he said. "I was a chauffeur. Thought I recognized you when you hired me, but couldn't be sure."

"Lord, Walt, you could've turned me in any time this year, nearly. Or demanded money."

"You always treated me right, Jack, which is more'n I can say for the Randalls," he said, jerking the car as he changed gears. "I was sacked like you'd shoot a dog. Wot you done in the past is no skin off my nose, sayin' I had proof, which I don't. And you've been treatin' me right since you hired me. Also Linwood and the girl. I been watchin' you there."

I hadn't been tempted by the girl, who was married in any case. "I was an altar boy," I said. "'Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness.'"

"Good stuff," he said. "'A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee.'"

"Amen to that — I hope!"

"So just wot it is, and why is it at Craik House?"

It was no time to hold anything back. I explained about wanting a ghost, about research, about the Wilmerding ghost.

"This ain't no lady in gray," Walt said grimly.

"No more it ain't. What it is, or where it came from, God and Gordon only know. I'll 'ave a word with Gordon tomorrow. Should've gone with the Larkworthy brothers. Anyway, that's the story."

"It's clear this thing followed them bones," Walt said reflectively. I saw his silhouette dark against the shop lights. "And look here, Jack, that sub-cellar's unconsecrated ground. Whether the bones came from Wilmerding or not, five'll get you ten they came from consecrated ground. That might've helped hold it down."

"I'd say so. I just hope takin' it back'll do the trick."

Walt's wife, Terry, greeted me at their flat in Stratford. Walt gave me a quick look when he introduced me as "My mate, Jack, 'oo needs a place to stay tonight."

I nodded; it would be impossible to explain what we'd been through.

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Terry was as sweet as she could be, and put me on the couch. I slept like a child till I was wakened by one. Fortunately the family roused early; we scurried round, Walt and me talking code about the necessity for an early start, and got off, to get to Craik House before Linwood and Mary arrived.

It was before sunrise, but nearly full light. We sat in the Lada for a moment, studying the house. Henley didn't see anything; I didn't feel anything. We went in cautiously, looked about. Nothing.

"Best we turn off those lights in the cellar, Jack."

"Right. Come with me, Walt?"

He saw nothing; I felt nothing.

"It only walks by night," I said. I raised the flagstone without feeling a thing, and pulled the parcel out. Back on the ground floor, I wrote out a label for it.

Then I went upstairs, bathed and so forth on my usual schedule, and came down to the dining room.

"Your usual, sir," said Henley, imperturbable as ever. "Bacon. Eggs. Toast. Coffee. I thought you might prefer that to tea. You look greatly improved, if I may say so."

"Thank you, Henley," I said in my best upper British tones. "I shall be off to work as usual this morning."

"Yes sir." His tone conveyed a hint of disapproval.

"Oh, and Henley, I wish you would call a delivery service — Larkworthy Brothers. I have a parcel I wish delivered. They'll have to use great care in its handling."

"Very good, sir. Where is the parcel?"

"On the Hall table. Oh, and I mean to have a word with Gordon about it — I was gravely disappointed in it."

"Quite so, sir."

I slipped out of the office about ten and gave Gordon a call. We had quite a row, in fact, he insisting that his boys had got the bones from Wilmerding, and 'ow was he to know they hadn't got the right ones? Anyway, what was the diff? Had I got the wrong ghost, ha-ha?

In short, he had no intention of putting it right, not even offering to take the bones back, not that I'd have taken him up on it. I was afraid he'd chuck them on a rubbish tip, and the demon would be let loose. The Larkworthies might be disrespectful, but they followed directions. By the time I rang off,

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I was determined never to deal with Gordon again.

Tinsley didn't make me feel any sweeter. He asked again about the ghost, and I was tempted to invite him down into the cellar.

That afternoon I was out of sorts. The Stock Market seemed uninteresting to me for the first time. At first it had struck me as the biggest, most successful con game in Britain, but today it bored me. Truth is, my mind was on ghosts and demons.

Henley greeted me as usual, took my brolly, hat, and coat. "The plumber's mate has been round, sir," he said. "He lacked the proper tools, but will return tomorrow, he says. You received another parcel from Mostain and Sons. Oh, the lorry from Larkworthy Brothers came. I entrusted the parcel to them. Though the driver, a certain Mervin Larkworthy, was a bit crude, I judged that he would give very satisfactory service."

"Thank you, Henley. That last is a great relief to me. Pity about the plumber, but it's to be expected. If you'll be so good as to fetch me a stiffish whiskey and soda in the study, I'll open the parcel from Mostain and Sons."

That evening I was in the library when Henley looked in.

"Oh, Henley," I said. "I've been doing some further research on Wilmerding. This account of the case observes that she never denied killing the infant, but swore that it was 'an Ympe or Limb of Satan.' A devil, that is. She claimed to have killed it in self-defense, and in defense of all Wilmerding."

"Interesting. You suggest that we received the bones of the infant."

"Yes. Gordon suggested it, and that made me think. The stone says there's *two* buried in that grave — her and the baby she killed. She always maintained it was a devil. From the way I was tempted, I agree. And her hanging around the grave — she wasn't mourning, or repenting. She was guarding it — making sure it didn't get loose."

"Then, unknowingly, we did the right thing in returning the bones to Wilmerding."

"I think so."

He nodded thoughtfully. "The servants have gone, sir. It's getting late. I thought that you might like to have me accompany you on a survey of the cellars."

"Oh, quite right, Henley. Half a moment, and I'll be with you."

I put the book on the table and led him to the cellar door. Bracing myself, I opened it and looked into the darkness. Nothing. With a shrug, I put on

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the light and went down the stair, feeling nothing.

"Henley ?"

"I see nothing, sir."

I pushed the switch on the other stair and again we marched down — marched right up to the flagstone, which I had re-grouted that afternoon. Nothing. Henley looked all around.

"Not a thing to be seen sir."

"Or felt."

We hesitated, looked into several of the rooms. We had the feeling that we were *about* to be frightened at any moment. But as minute by minute passed and we neither heard nor felt anything, we relaxed.

"Dead as King Tut's tomb," I said.

"Deader, sir. They say Tut's tomb is cursed."

We went upstairs, turning off the lights, closed but did not bother to lock the door.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Oh, one more thing, Henley." I gestured him to follow me to the study and indicated a chair. He sat as stiffly as a butler.

"I've got a little problem. People expect an old family place to have a ghost; Tinsley mentioned it again today. My first attempt to procure one failed, as you know. However, I still need a-a *safe* ghost, if you take my meaning." I showed him a book on Ghosts of England. "There's a really likely possibility at a place called Much Matchingham—"

Henley's eyebrow rose an eighth of an inch. "Sir?"

"— In Shropshire —" I sighed. This wouldn't be easy.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

OUR COMPUTERS/OUR SELVES

YOU PROBABLY have a computer of some kind, if only a hand calculator. Owning it seems natural, convenient, unremarkable. Never for example, do you think of yourself as a slave owner.

But someday you might be — in a way. If our silicon conveniences get more complex, can they pass over a fuzzy boundary into selfhood?

That depends on how you think of them, and of us. With the spread of personal computers, a common analogy has crept into the way we think of ourselves, with implications that we don't truly understand.

Much science fiction, and a lot of everyday talk, assumes that we are much like computers. Simply put, the analogy goes like this: brains resemble "wet-ware" computers, and minds are like programs. We, our precious Selves, are programs running on our brain-computers.

Is this reasonable? Here we enter the swamp of meta-philosophy, though with a life raft of experience for consolation.

Start from the beginning. Computers are tiny circuits etched in silicon chips. They have been made of other things, though, sometimes as simple as tinker-toy mechanical parts. These oddities show that programs can run on several different types of hardware, displaying properties independent of the hard "substrate." So it seems plausible, to some, that our brains might be just another substrate, although rather slippery and less reliable.

We're intelligent, by (our) definition. Computers running on hardware made of silicon are getting faster, more powerful, increasing their total memory by the year. Does this mean that they will eventually become intelligent?

There is a vast difference between intelligence and raw processing power. Computers will probably

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reach the human level of data processing within two or three decades — about ten "teraops," where a teraop is a thousand billion operations, or bits of information (basically, a choice between a zero or a one in a particular slot) per second. This huge number, 10,000,000,000,000, is really how many synapses are available to fire at any time, not the number of ideas or sensations you register. Sensations are whole constellations of information, just as the brush of a breeze is a multitude of molecules caressing your cheek. In conceptual space, we can take in consciously about one new piece of information per second. We're slow learners.

Still, let's call that number, a ten trillion bits, a "Library," because the Library of Congress holds approximately that much stored in books, i.e., pressed into the bodies of dead trees. (The Britannica holds about a tenth of a Library, while our DNA carries a mere thousandth of a Library—though of course we have one in every cell. Nature likes redundancy.)

By the late 1990s, our data collecting satellites which monitor the environment, carrying out Mission to Planet Earth, will send down to us about that number of bits *per day*. Human brains process that fast already, mostly to do body maintenance. We can hold in memory roughly a Library's worth of bits — far more than, say, an alligator, which can remember at most about ten billion bits, a thousandth of our capacity. That's enough to get the alligator around his mucky world, but does not qualify him to vote, attend Harvard, or speculate on the meaning of Self.

Computer speeds have increased hugely over these last few decades. Mind-power, though, is another matter, almost completely unconnected with speed. If we knew how to write a program as smart as you, we would not need to run it on a fast computer unless we wanted it to respond as quickly as you. Instead, I could take your Self Program 1.0 and run it on the laptop I'm writing this on. With 40 megabits of memory, conceivably this machine could run "you" — but *very* slowly, and without some of your memories. It would behave like a very dumb, sleepy "you."

So speed isn't the essential here. To see if Self Program 1.0 is possible, we have to look deeper than counting bits and teraops.

At a cocktail party you probably assess others' intelligence without thinking about it. That's the Turing Test — people pass it with you every day, just by convincing you that there's some Self in there talking back. We assume people on the other end of the telephone conversation,

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for example, are not really "expert systems" designed to fool us. (Imagine a few decades from now, when this will be a real possibility. Already some answering machines seem smarter than the secretaries they replaced, or at least more reliable.)

The Turing Test is always limited; you don't ask an infinite string of questions, to be quite sure you're talking to a true Self; you haven't the time. We intuitively know, though, that computers which can play chess or even diagnose diseases aren't candidiates for their own Bill of Rights. Reliable, sure — just as a light switch is. Computers do some difficult things, like balancing accounts or adding numbers or selecting from a menu of choices, very well. Other skills, natural to us, they struggle with — picking up a glass of water, say, or navigating around furniture. One of the consolations of the Coming of the Computers is that in many functions lawyers and doctors can be replaced, but cooks and gardeners will remain human.

But merely looking at apparent complexity in a brain or a silicon computer still isn't enough. We have electronic data systems like ArpaNet, InterNet, BitNet, etc. which cast webs of information exchange around the entire planet. With roughly ten million users, they have a computing power roughly like that of your brain, but nobody would confuse them with you. Though their cheerleaders believe these nets represent something qualitatively different in our culture, they are basically sophisticated mailboxes. Merely capitalizing the word Matrix does not make the nets a self-aware entity, and adding more processing units will not help. They are passive, dumb.

What even "expert" programs miss is complexity — that still mysterious property which emerges from complicated systems as the details of the process blur into the background. In our brains, the snap of synapses lies behind a quick quip, but we don't sense those neural events. They're tiny.

Instead, the mind is better seen as a system of systems, a point of view Marvin Minsky advanced in his ground-breaking *The Society of Mind.* The characteristic of such complexity is that new things emerge from old. Fresh ideas bubble up to us, somehow concocted from the old, fixed information in our memories. How? Nobody knows — yet.

The complexity of Mind must be qualitatively different. We get an idea of how different this must be by looking at our picture of computers. My laptop can run many different programs, but not all. It has a

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relatively small capacity, and many programs are written in an unintelligible language. My IBM-type laptop won't run Apple-type programs, though I can translate between them already. But such facets are like the division of Christianity into Catholic and Protestant, and are bound to fade. In principle, any computer could run a program if it had the room.

Brains aren't like that. Our Selves consist of our hard wiring, the hard-won patterns we've grown. They are not "coded" into our brains, like sentences written on this previously blank page you're reading. Your mind could not run on my brain. A vast number of "mind-transfer" sf stories skate over this simple but profound point, to their loss. Not that mind transfer is forever impossible, though. The real story to be told about it is how difficult it will be, and what it may imply.

Sticking a wire into your head and jetting through computer spaces, as in the 1984 film *Tron* (and prose sf), is implausible. Computers are digital, sending short pulses of electricity at high speed, strings of 0s and 1s which are then read as numbers or words. Brains are particularly analog devices, like a mercury thermometer which registers temperature by the height of a silvery column. These methods don't interact well.

A neuron can generate about a hundred signals in a second. Today's electronic switches (chips) switch a hundred *billion* times per second. Obviously, there's a mismatch. Further, chips are made quickly and cheaply in factories. Neurons have to build themselves from the inside out, growing as a baby ages. This leads to profoundly different rates of changing, learning, and forgetting, as well.

When John Von Neumann invented the modern computer, he was being quite practical. He had a hard-wired computer, ENIAC, which connected given tubes and switches ("memory registers") with actual copper wires. To reprogram, von Neumann had to move the wires. He tired of this, so invented the idea of programming. (This echoes Robert Heinlein's observation that all real progress comes from laziness.)

So he designed new data memory registers so that they not only held passive information, like old data and more recent results, but could retain instructions for how to flip electric switches. These switches made new connections to the existing wires in ENIAC. Those instructions were the first program. They did the re-routing of electrical current, instead of some poor technician with a screwdriver.

That is a quite deep difference

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between ourselves and our computers.

Our brains are like von Neumann's old ENIAC. To make and keep a memory, we form new connections between existing neurons. Those neurons are not simple switches; instead, they connect with a few thousand other neurons. Once made, connections last — they are kept "up and running" by the same ebbs and flows that keep the rest of your body going. That's why we take time to learn new things — the brain has to knock down some connections and rebuild them. Thinking hard, we can burn up to 40 percent of our calories just cogitating. You really do tire from thinkingThe quality and kind of these many-neuron connections determines the kind of intelligence we have, the style of our Selves. The kind of connections is also task-specific among living things. Other animals process their data—that is, experience their surroundings—in ways we cannot understand or duplicate. Bats see with sound waves, dolphins with sonar—and their brains work this information over differently, yielding a different perceived world.

So your memory of your grandmother is not "coded" in the way that your airline reservation resides in a computer. Her image is hard-wired, laid down in synaptic strata. The twinkle in your grandmother's eyes, so easy to call up, may be reached by different routes in your memory, too. You might recall the sled she gave you that distant winter, and see the twinkle. Or you might remember the sled's name—Rosebud, say—and reach the twinkle that way.

We have something like holographic memory, with important information reachable by processes we sometimes can't even know. That's why you can often recall a friend's name by *not* thinking about him for a few moments. Your subconscious has gone on, rummaging through associations (other friends, meetings, 'photos' kept in storage, like your grandmother's twinkle). Then the name pops into your head, retrieved by a roundabout route.

This means that single memories are linked together, but there can be many avenues. Smells often call up distant memories, apparently because the smell perceptors in the brain are near, in the neuron-connection sense, to the sites of long-term memory.

A better picture of our brains is really the Web Model, in which distant strands tremble if you shake in the right way. (Seeing the reflections from a sharp blue sea may recall that twinkle; or maybe a trip through your old school yard will, for reasons you can't readily call up.

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Again, we are mysterious to ourselves.)

To dissolve a strong memory takes wholesale destruction of many neuronal connections. You'll never forget your grandmother, but you will forget last Tuesday's lunch—in fact, probably already have. Rewiring takes time. Most of the day's events, though, you don't need to keep. They're repetitious, and would quickly take up all the room you have if you tried to hang onto them.

Of course, the "you" here isn't the conscious, voluntary you. It's something we crudely term the subconscious. It works without your knowing it does, though at a far higher level than the operations which keep you running—digestion, breathing, heartbeat—down in the medulla, a knot at the join between your brain and the central nervous system.

When we sleep, our subconscious throws away most of the memories of the previous day, cleaning house and dusting off to make more room you'll need later. So you can't remember immediately what you had for breakfast twenty-four hours ago, and have to reconstruct it from hints ("I usually have cereal...yes, and there were eggs, too...") This subconscious editing and garbage disposal is essential, because we use all of our memory fairly often, despite claims that we use only a fraction of our brains. Unused material is thrown away, unless it's powerful stuff, deeply implanted with many connecting routes (like your grandmother's smile, or your first date).

So in this way our brains are very different from our silicon servants. But there is a deeper level, requiring much more knowledge about ourselves than we now have, where the brain/computer analogy might work. Silicon computers actually rewire themselves, too.

My laptop running a new program differs internally from the same laptop last week. Programs set and reset tiny switches in the central processing unit, millions of times a second. The computer is ever-changing. Programs rewire computers in a flexible way. We can't see this, of course, but the computing "brain" alters constantly as a program runs.

So at a very tiny level, our brains lie in a continuum with computers in this important way. In a meaningful way, a computer in a given state (with particular settings of its myriad switches) can run only one program—the one which set those switches.

But it will take a long, long time before we understand brains well enough to make a computer program emulate a brain. Particularly

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since there is a hierarchy in all this which we can only dimly glimpse.

Switches are the underlying, simple building blocks. Stacking layers of systems of switches eventually builds to Mind. Where does the transition occur? We do not know, and no simple extension of machine capability seems likely to tell us. In Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, stacking up sheer processing power led to a sentient computer named Mike. Maybe the transition can occur like that, but we can scarcely count on such miracles.

We do understand that no given neuron or switch is essential to the Mind, and indeed our brains deal constantly with the quiet death of cells. What matters is the interactions a neuron has with tens of thousands of other neurons. When it dies, others take up the slack, embedding memory in other, fresh connections. Evolution favored this, since redundancy of function is a good safeguard against forgetting something vital. Cells come and go, but your grandmother remains, beaming at you in "wet-ware" memory.

Most "cybernetic philosophers" feel that mere information processing requires no fundamental complexity or intelligence. Making new information does—so Mind, with the capital letter, stands for Mystery, too—and for the fact that we do not experience how our own minds work. Though we live inside this marvelous machine, we do not have a clue about where the transition from a vast field of fast switches merges into a thing which can know itself, at least in a limited way. Intelligence can't be the product of a simple rule-based system, such as expert systems which diagnose problems. It could mimic a human for a while, but ultimately would fail the Turing Test. Only a rule-based program which had so many rules that the individual rules got lost in the noise would have a chance—and that would verge upon the swampy province where Mind emerges.

Perhaps in retrospect some degree of brain-computer resemblance is unsurprising, because we have created computers using our brains. Some aping of method is probably inevitable, though perhaps unconscious. After all, there are other qualitative resemblances. Both brains and computers have fibrous structures (wires vs. nerves), they use a traffic of signals following well-defined routes (not just broadcasting at large, as some electrochemical reactions do), and use pulses of electricity to carry out logical operations (changing local states).

Indeed, the recent land-rush euphoria in computing circles for "par-

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allel processing"—running programs simultaneously, which then merge to solve a problem—echoes our own brains' method of dealing with several tasks at the same time. Our three-pound package of slow and slimy parts organizes in a phalanx of parallel processors, so that indeed, we can walk and chew gum at the same time—and think about the Self, into the bargain.

All this said, can computers hold a "brain emulator" within themselves? Duplicating all the neuronal connections is possible, in the sense that we could run the brain-emulator as a program on a vast computer, which in turn runs a meta-program (Self, Mind) on a conceptual layer above the emulator. This is really only one grand program, of course, but it is easier to think of it as two-layered: The first floor imitates the wiring of our brains. One flight up, a program uses the information lodged in that wiring pattern, to synthesize a sense of Self.

It's only one more step, then, to invent the idea of transferring our Selves to computers—termed "uploading." Charles Platt's *The Silicon Man* is the best sf novel I've seen that deals with the gritty feel this might have. Its plot armature is the central motivation: escaping death. When might this be possible? Hans Moravec, in *Mind Children*, estimates that "human equivalence" in a super computer (a linear development of the Cray class of the early 1990s) will be possible around 2010. If personal computers keep advancing as they have before, they could run human-like programs around 2030. Then your laptop could become your friend—or your slave, depending on your point of view.

How? The mere theoretical capability is no true guide. Despite the ease science fictional characters have interfacing with computers, there are all the decided conceptual problems sketched already, plus problems with humdrum technical hassles. The frequency of brains is a million times lower than computers, and their electromagnetic bandwidths vastly different. Sensing the workings of a computer by plugging a wire into your brain will be like trying to take a drink from a firehose—most likely, you'll get nothing but a sore mouth.

Then there are the grungy details of how to extract the information in your head. In principle we could do this without knowing in detail how the brain works. Instead, we can use the principles of copying software, to recognize neurons and then replace all the functions of each neuron with a computer simulation.

Neurons hold your Self, encoded in their myriad connections. It's not enough to know the location and

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type of neuron; one must also see how each one responds and sends electrical signals, how it is affected by its chemical environment, etc. You think differently when your adrenal glands have been squirting into your bloodstream—as anyone with a temper, like me, knows.

This demands that the neurosurgeon insert microscopic machines which can sit atop a layer of the brain, registering how you think while you're subjected to a number of influences, probed by stimuli, and perform some thinking tasks. A sheet of these sensors covers the crown of your brain as the process begins, building a three-dimensional map of a thin layer of your brain cells. Added to a general map of human neural structure, the surgeon writes a program which models the way your brain layer works, the myriad idiosyncratic ways you think.

This working model can then be sharpened by you and the surgeon, by comparing its output signals to those you emit, given the same stimulus. Flash by neuronal flash, this computer model is made to exactly echo yours. Once they correspond, a bit of your Self resides in a computer. The trouble is, that works fine for the top layer—but what then? To reach the next layer down, the surgeon's easiest path is simply to shave away your brain, or render it dormant in some fashion. It seems quite plausible that destroying that layer might be the only course for quite a long time in the evolution of neurosurgery. This means your brain, to be fully read, must die.

You end up with an excavated skull, perhaps without even interrupting your train of thought or perceiving any pain. (Luckily, the brain has no pain perceptors in its spaghetti snarls of nerves.) Not a voyage for the squeamish. Obviously, the material Self is gone. Your represented Self remains, in silicon. It says so, right here in the contract.

Moravec suggests a halfway house for this journey into digital immortality. Our brains are in fact already a house divided. The left half controls the body's right side, right hemisphere managing the left. They also specialize in technical tasks, conferring back and forth with each other, connected by thick bundles of nerve fibers, the *corpus callosum*. Severing these fibers doesn't shut down the brain; rather, each side proves to be an independent, intelligent, fully conscious Self.

Suppose, half a century or so from now, a surgeon cuts that nerve highway between your hemispheres. A computer can eavesdrop on the data flow between the two hemispheres, then pass it on, keeping your bi-

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sected Selves in touch with each other. The computer cooks up a model of how you operate. As your brain ages, losing cells and functions, your keen wit slowly blunting, the computer program can insinuate itself, keeping up your mental crafts. Eventually, your brain loses so many cells, and perhaps succumbs to various diseases of degeneration, and dies. But the program remains, suitable for installing permanently on a computer — without any sense that your Self has ebbed.

That is the essence of a deep identity problem — continuity. When we sleep, the subconscious remains active, insuring continuity at a broad level. Nobody wakes up and thinks they are a new person. (In fact, sometimes I feel a thousand years old.) Patients brain-cooled until their brain waves lapse can later revive with their sense of self intact. But are they "really" the same?

They awaken into a world unchanged. This would not be so if they were revived, say, ten years later, or in India. I have read many sf stories in which characters struggle to have copies of themselves stored, or do indeed awaken as copies of some dead original, and go on about their business. It's all quite blissful.

Nonsense. I'm rather cranky about the cavalier way this is tossed off, probably because I'm an identical twin. Until we were about twenty, my brother and I were indistinguishable by all but our parents, and sometimes not even them. Everybody remarked on how similar we were in looks, manner, even dress.

But we always knew who we were, even if they didn't. A great deal of "uploading" fiction assumes without thinking about it that if a copy behaves the same, and thinks it's the original, then it *is*. Case closed, cut to the chase.

My brother came to be a research physicist living on the coast of California, just like me, and with similar bad habits — but we are two different Selves. There is a huge difference between the inner sense of Self and outer appearances.

Matter transmitters which destroy people and recreate them elsewhere do not satisfy the continuity condition because the original knows it dies. One can disguise this by making death instantaneous, of course — so the Star Trek crew never flinch at the prospect of being disintegrated when they beam up. But this is the same argument which states that we cannot know if we are the same person five minutes later — instantaneous transformations by definition dodge the issue of continuity, since they are discon-

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tinuous changes.

To get around this, fans of uploading must promise continuity, by showing that the underlying structure (the brain) is continuous, even if consciousness and brain activity is not. Matter transmission, on the other hand, has no inherent continuity of substrate or "software." At sufficient distances and times, there is no way to tell if a transmitted person is the same as the original, since you cannot compare it with the original, and you can't count on those who knew the original to sharply remember the original. (Of course you can make a film of the original, but this is just the identical twin fallacy. One must interact with a copy to see if it carries the true deep content of an original.)

The fallback answer is to keep the Self awake while the transition goes on, so that it knows it is intact. Personally, those are the only terms I'd accept in any uploading scheme. Otherwise, there's a real chance that at the deep level, you're merely entering into a suicide pact.

All this discussion points to a glaring deficiency in our understanding of our selves: we have no deep understanding of how we think, of what the Self is. Some say it is a convenient fiction—in computer lingo an "operating system"—which lets the ego manage matters.

There is probably no more difficult problem in science than the blend of experiment and philosophy which attempts to confront this problem of defining Self. When you get an exceptionally smart home computer, a few decades hence, you may find such discussions becoming real, everyday issues. How will we think about them—and about ourselves?

I'll approach that sticky question next time. Or rather, the "I" who writes that column will, weeks from now. Will it be the same "I" typing these words? Interesting question...

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Bridget McKenna lives in the "gold country" of central California, where she's studying Japanese, raising koi and watching her cat population explode. She also finds time to write: she has just finished her second mystery novel, and is working on computer games and television scripts. Her short fiction has appeared in Writers of the Future, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Amazing Stories, *and* Pulphouse. *"The Good Pup" marks her first appearance in* F&SF.

The Good Pup

By Bridget McKenna

ROMER WILLS HAD THIS pup — a good pup — and he and his family were mightily attached to it. I was there through the whole thing; through the pup's life and death and everything that came after, and though trouble and sorrow were a part of it, there was also happiness and rejoicing, so who's to say what happened wasn't a good thing after all?

A stray bitch dropped the pup in Romer's barn one chilly spring night during calving time, then disappeared, leaving her get behind on a pile of dirty straw in an empty horse stall. Romer's twins, Annie and Elvis, and Romer's wife, Margie, took to bottle-feeding the little thing around the clock, which annoyed Romer some, as he could have used more help around that time.

I was the only hand on the Willses' farm that year, and Romer and I did all the rest of the calving and picked up the slack on some of the other

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chores, too, until the pup was weaned.

"Just my goddamned luck," Romer would grumble from time to time, "to have the whole family wasting their time wet-nursing a dog we probably ought to have drowned outright." That sounds harsh, I know, but it was Romer's way to talk like that sometimes, and he never did mean a thing by it. Nobody ever drowned anything on Romer Wills' farm, and that was more than could be said for most of his neighbors, the ones who would be around later waving Bibles and quoting Scripture. Eventually Romer came to admit that it was a fine pup and might amount to something someday, which was his way of saying that he liked it a lot.

The pup never had a name, at least not one that stuck, and finally we'd all called it "Pup" for so long, there didn't seem to be much point trying to call it anything else. It got weaned, and it got bigger, and it got to be a part of the family, and that would probably have been that for the next fourteen years or so, except that the pup died.

It was during one of those midsummer thunderstorms that can drop two inches of warm rain on you between supper and bedtime that Pup wandered off and didn't show up for the supper scraps Margie always put out for him on a pie plate on the back porch. When little Elvis saw the plate sitting there and no Pup, he came looking for me.

"You seen that Pup, Dorsey?" he asked me, not really concerned yet, when he found me in the tractor shed.

"Not around here," I told him, and he went off to look some more.

Annie came by maybe an hour later, soaked through her slicker from staying out so long in the rain. "Has Pup been in here, Dorsey?"

"No, ma'am."

Annie always giggled when I called her ma'am, but she was too worried about Pup to care right now. I got worried, too, and went off to search with them, so it ended up being me who found the body in a ditch beyond Romer's fence where it had crawled off from the road to die. He lay there in my flashlight beam, blood and rain soaking into the ground under his head. I switched off the flashlight and carried him back to Romer's yard.

"Oh, the poor thing!" Margie cried out when she saw me carrying the pup toward the house. "Take him out back before the twins see!" But just then the twins came running around the side of the house and saw me and the dead pup and commenced to crying, and their mama cried with them.

"We could have a funeral," I suggested. "That would be the proper thing

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to do." My idea was that if I could get the kids thinking about the necessities of a funeral, it might help take their minds off the tragedy proper.

"Can we, Mama?" Annie asked. "Can we?" echoed Elvis.

"That sounds like a fine idea," Margie agreed, smiling gratefully at me now that the twins had stopped bawling, "But not until morning. Dorsey will take care of Pup until then, won't you, Dorsey?"

"Yes, ma'am, I will. Elvis, first thing in the morning, you and I'll build a coffin. Annie, you go out and gather some flowers. We'll need a lot of those." Romer had come out onto the porch and watched with his hands in his overall pockets and his pipe hanging kind of mournfully from the corner of his mouth. I can't say he had tears in his eyes, but then, I can't say he didn't, either. There was sorrow in his posture and on his face, and those were the kinds of signs you had to look for if you wanted to know what Romer was feeling, because he wasn't ever likely to tell you outright.

I took Pup into the barn and laid him in the same horse stall he'd started out in all of five months before. Then I washed up and went to the house to watch some TV with the family.

"Should we nail the lid on, Dorsey?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary, Elvis. It fits together real good just the way we made it."

The rain had stopped in the night, and it had gotten back to being July again, with the sky so blue it pained to look at it. Annie came in with a double armload of flowers, and the three of us carried the tiny coffin solemnly to a place way out behind the house under a big oak tree, and took turns with the shovel until we had a hole deep enough to keep marauding animals from digging up the grave. When I looked back toward the house, I saw Romer and Margie watching us from the back porch.

Over the next couple of days, the twins started getting over the shock of losing Pup. Romer hadn't said anything to them, but he was planning on finding them another dog when we went into town on Saturday, to cheer them up a bit. What happened Friday night changed all that and a hell of a lot more.

Pup was three days dead, and things nearly back to normal. Margie had put away his toys and his food dish, and washed the twins' bedspreads, which she said still smelled a little doggy from him sleeping on their beds. The twins were asleep, and Romer and Margie and I were watching an old

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movie on TV, when we heard the scratching at the door.

"I'll just let him in," Margie started to say, then, halfway to her feet, she remembered there was no Pup to let in, and she sat back down. "I don't know what's scratching at my kitchen door, Romer, but *you* can get up and take care of it."

Romer and I both laughed at that, and Margie laughed with us, but she just sat there in her chair and picked up her sewing and made Romer get up and go to the door. There was a loud curse from the kitchen — the strongest thing I ever heard Romer say, as I recall — and when he walked back into the living room, a little pale, Pup walked in with him.

"Jesus Christ on a mountain!" Margie exclaimed, and that was about the worst I ever heard out of her, too, Margie not being inclined to take the Lord's name in vain. "Jesus Lord Almighty! How can it be?" I didn't say anything, being scared mostly out of my wits.

"Dorsey," Romer said, and his voice was awfully unsteady, "are you sure you buried this dog?" I just nodded.

"And are you sure it was our Pup, and are you absolutely sure he was dead?"

I tried my voice. "Yes. Yes to everything, Romer. It was Pup, and he was *stone* dead."

"Then how in God's name do you explain *this*?" His voice rose and cracked on the last word.

Now, all this time, Pup, being totally ignorant of all the fuss he was causing, was watching this conversation like a tennis game, his ears flopping as he turned his head from Romer to me and back. There was a little bit of dried blood on his head, and some dirt on his fur, but other than that, he looked perfectly fine. His tail thumped double time on the floor, and he kind of wriggled all over and whined just a bit, like he wished we'd pay some attention to him after he'd just come back from the dead and all. Finally he trotted over and jumped up in Margie's lap.

Margie squealed and put her hands up in the air like a holdup victim. Pup licked her face once, then jumped down again and headed for the twins' room. Romer stood there in the kitchen doorway with his hands hanging down at his sides, and Margie stared at him and he stared back, and I said good night and went to bed.

The twins were overjoyed to have Pup back, and, to them, it was simple: he'd never been dead in the first place, and wasn't it lucky, Elvis

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said, that we hadn't nailed down that coffin lid? I wasn't so sure. I'd seen the crushed skull and carried the stiffening body in from the road, and I wasn't sure it was lucky at all.

We went into town, and the twins insisted Pup come, too. Romer said no at first, but they knew it wasn't a hard no, and backed him down. So, in the end, it was Romer and Margie in the front of the Chevy pickup, and me and Annie and Elvis and Pup in the back, riding the twenty-one miles into town for shopping and a movie. Pup curled up in the lee of the pickup's cab and put his head and one paw on my leg, and I forgot my misgivings as I scratched behind his ears and felt the summer breeze whipping my hair around.

Old Mrs. Hendrix came hobbling by as we were climbing down from the truck, and smiled and waved at us. "Morning, Margie. Morning, Romer, Dorsey. Hi there, you twins." Mrs. Hendrix was so bent up with arthritis that she stood barely four and a half feet tall, with hands like claws that grieved her day and night. In spite of that, she was a cheerful woman, and always had a nickel for each of the twins, who were too polite to tell her nickels were obsolete.

She was digging painfully in her purse for change, when she noticed Pup, with his paws up on the side of the truck bed, and his tongue lolling out in a kind of Pup smile.

"Is that a new dog, Margie?" Mrs. Hendrix said, pointing her ancient cane toward Pup. "Nona Matz said your dog had been hit by a car in that storm a few nights back."

"He wasn't really dead, Mrs. Hendrix!" Annie told her. "We buried him and everything, but he wasn't really dead, and he came back!" Romer looked a little distressed, probably about Annie mentioning the burying part, but he didn't say anything.

"Well, aren't you the lucky ones?" Mrs. Hendrix said, and reached up a claw hand to pet Pup, who scrunched down a bit as if to make it easier for her. "You're such a good pup; yes, you are," she avowed, patting Pup's head. "You came back to your family." She smiled and reached into her purse again, then stopped suddenly and withdrew her hand and stared at it.

A moment later, we were *all* staring. The fingers of the hand, which had been twisted all out of recognition, with huge, lumpy knuckles like the joints of crabs' legs, were now almost straight. As we watched with our mouths open like a gathering of idiots, Mrs. Hendrix's back began to shift

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under her dress like a sluggish snake, straightening its painful curve until she stood nearly as upright as any of us. Mrs. Hendrix stared at Pup. Pup wriggled and thumped his tail.

"I . . . I have to get back home now," Mrs. Hendrix said in a kind of dazed voice. "Nice seeing you-all." She touched Pup's head again and walked away, still using the cane out of habit for the first few steps, then pitching it into the gutter at the corner and hurrying across the street.

"Margie," Romer said almost calmly, "I think Pup had ought to stay in the cab of the truck while we're in the store."

THERE WERE a few folks kind of hanging around the truck when we got through shopping, but Romer wouldn't talk to any of them, and said we'd have to skip the movie, and hurried us home. When we got there, the phone was ringing.

Margie answered it, and of course it was someone calling to ask about what had happened to old Mrs. Hendrix. She'd been seen playing leapfrog in the park with some of the town kids, and said that Pup had worked a miracle on her. Of course, Margie said that was just plain silly, and she said that to the next fifteen or twenty people who called, too. Then she took the phone off the hook.

After supper a car came up the driveway. Since folks didn't often come visiting unannounced, the whole family came out on the porch to see who it might be. The car stopped, and Polly Harding got out; she was talking hard before the car door slammed. "Rose Hendrix told me your dog worked a miracle on her. She says he rose from the dead and cured her arthritis. Is that true, Margie? Is it true, Romer?" Polly stood in front of the porch steps, hands on her hips, looking up at them with some mixture of hope and disapproval.

Margie looked to Romer for a clue. "Well, Polly," Romer began in his slow way, "it may be true Mrs. Hendrix is feeling better, but I don't know that it's on account of Pup. We don't have any proof that Pup had anything to do with it."

"Don't you lie to me, Romer Wills," Polly said. "I saw her this afternoon, and she's standing up just as straight, and walking nice as you please with no cane, so don't you lie. She said it was Pup worked the miracle."

"Well, let's just suppose — only for the sake of argument, you understand — that it *was* Pup, and it *was* a miracle. What do you want from us?"

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"I've got the blinding headaches, Romer. Sometimes I can hardly think for them. If Pup were to work me a miracle, I could be normal again."

It certainly was true that Polly had a lot of headaches. To hear Ed Harding tell it, she had one nearly every night of the week. Still, Romer didn't seem too inclined to try out Pup's possible miracle power to make Polly normal, if indeed that would have been the result.

"I can't help you, Polly, and neither can Pup," he told her. "If I said yes to you, and if you didn't have a headache tonight, I'd have a hundred people here tomorrow wanting the same thing — to touch my dog. Now doesn't that sound a little silly to you?" Polly just glared.

"Are you denying me my chance to be healed, Romer Wills? Because if you are, I swear on all that's holy I'll make you sorry you treated me this way. I'll make all of you sorry." She shook a fist at them.

Romer took a step forward. "I'm already sorry, Polly. I don't want any hard feelings, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave now, and not say any more about this."

Polly spun around and marched back to her car. She hurled up a rooster tail of dust and was gone out the gate in seconds, but that was not to be the last of it; no sooner had her car disappeared down the road than two cars slowed and turned in at the gate, followed by another three. Romer let out a heartfelt sigh, and Margie herded the twins inside; in a moment, I could see them looking out an upstairs window. Pup sat inside the screen door, watching everything with friendly interest.

The folks all got out of their cars, each one looking about at the others in surprise, as though they were sure they were the only ones who'd thought of driving out here to ask about the miracle. A couple more cars pulled up the drive as the first neighbor approached the porch.

"Evening, Romer." That was Sam Outerbridge, probably the wealthiest farmer in the county. Unlike Romer and most others who tried to take a living from the land hereabouts, Sam prospered and invested and prospered some more. Come Sunday, he said it was the Lord's blessing made him rich, but that didn't stop him from converting his farm-subsidy checks to high-yield CD's on the weekdays.

"Evening, Sam," Romer said. "What brings you by?" There was an edge to his voice when he said this, since Sam Outerbridge had always been a deal too important to pay social calls to the Willses' house up until now.

"They're talking in town" — he gestured back toward the others, who

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were still growing in number — "about that dog of yours."

"That's what I understand," Romer replied, taking out a pouch of tobacco and filling his pipe.

"They say it's a healing dog, crazy as that sounds," said Sam.

"Sounds crazy to me, all right," Romer agreed. He struck a match and held it above the pipe.

"Christ, Romer, just tell me yes or no! Does the dog work miracles, or doesn't it? 'Cause if it does, I need one."

"Everybody needs some kind of miracle sometime, Sam, but I don't think my dog can provide."

"You see," Sam went on as though Romer hadn't spoken, "Christine can't have any more children, not after she had the girl, and I've always hankered for a son." His wife came up out of the group and stood beside him, putting on a face that might be described as noble and deserving. "If your dog could fix her up inside the way he fixed old Mrs. Hendrix. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Sam. Margie and I can't have any more either after the twins, and sometimes we wish we could, but it's not a thing we have any control over. There's not going to be any miracle; you'll just have to love what you've got, the way we do. Go home now, all of you," he said to the people standing around. "I can't help you." He waited for them to leave, but nobody did.

Sonny van Cleve left the crowd and approached the porch steps. "Excuse me, Mr. Wills, but if it's true what they say about your dog, I need his help. I injured this left knee last year and had some surgery on it, but it's still not going to be strong enough to get me back on the football team come next fall. . . ."

"I wish there were something I could do for you — for all of you — but our Pup's just a dog, not some kind of hallelujah TV healer, and all this talk about miracles is just going to cause a lot of problems for me and my family. I wish you'd all just please go home now and forget all this."

Pup was still sitting inside and scratching himself in a normal sort of dog way every now and then. None of this seemed to interest him much at all — until Andy McGraw pulled his car up behind the others and took his son Charlie out of the backseat and carried him in his arms up to Romer's porch, with the people parting for him like some kind of living Red Sea. The boy was close to dead — everyone knew that — the doctors had written him off and sent him home to die. There was so little left of him that Andy carried him as easily as he might a baby.

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"Andy, why did you bring Charlie all the way out here, sick as he is?" Romer asked him. Behind him, Pup was getting restless, whining and scratching at the screen.

Andy looked up at him out of a face aged ten years by worry and grief. "My boy's dying. He hurts all the time, even with the drugs they give him, and he can't hold down food anymore." He looked down at the pale face of his son, then back up at Romer. "The doctor said all we can do now is let him die in his own home."

Charlie didn't say anything. His eyes were half-shut, and just breathing seemed like it was hard work for him. Pup was scratching at the door in earnest now, and barking for someone to let him out.

Romer seemed to slump a little, as though the weight of this day were pressing down on his shoulders. "I know that, Andy," he said real quiet.

"But for God's sake, Romer, he's only seventeen!"

Pup had loosened a corner of the screen away from the frame and stuck his head through. I reached for him to push him back in, but he gave a quick wiggle and escaped me and the door all at the same time. The people in Romer's yard gasped as Pup dove off the porch and up into Charlie's arms with a happy bark. Charlie managed a low chuckle as Pup licked his face, tail whipping around like a Fourth of July sparkler.

Just then the folks standing around forgot they were stunned and remembered why they were here. They dove for Pup, reaching for him like they were drowning. Andy crouched down on the ground, protecting Charlie with his body. Pup wriggled away and back up onto the porch and through the torn screen.

The crowd started toward the steps, but the look on Romer's face turned them back. "This is the craziest goddamned thing I ever saw grown people do!" he shouted. "Get in your cars and go home!"

Two and three at a time, the people turned around and walked to their cars. "I touched him," someone said, and someone else: "I'm healed for sure. I know I am." Romer looked up at Margie and the twins in the upstairs window and shook his head. When the last car was gone out the gate, we went back in the house, and I fixed the screen door.

The next day, everyone knew that Charlie McGraw went home and slept twelve hours, then got up and asked his mama for a big breakfast, and wasn't using any more pain medicine. By noon the driveway was full of cars again. This time, Romer let Pup come outside, because if there were really miracles happening here, he said, he didn't feel like he ought to stand in the way of it.

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Again Pup chose whom he wanted to help, and ignored the half-assed miracle seekers, who took advantage of his nearness to grab a touch anyway.

When the next day's miracle reports came in, the situation got entirely out of hand. Real work ground to a halt on the farm, and Romer, Margie, the twins, and I stayed busy just directing traffic for Pup. People were starting to come in from nearby towns, and there'd been calls from a couple of TV stations and newspapers, but it sounded so much like one of those crazy supermarket newspaper stories that I think it scared them off a little. "Family Dog Cures Cancer!" — I mean, I wouldn't have believed it either.

It didn't occur to any of us at the time that there might be anyone who was less than happy to have Pup restoring sight, hearing, and health on a wholesale basis, but early Wednesday morning, Reverend Castledine paid a call with a committee of first-rate Christian ladies and Ed Harding — Polly Harding was heading up the committee, and Ed appeared to have come along for the ride.

They invited themselves in, and Margie served them coffee in the living room. Romer asked me to take Pup out to the back porch to keep him out of the way, so I did. Then I stood just inside the kitchen door and watched through the doorway. If somebody was going to make trouble for the family, it would be my trouble, too.

The ladies flanked Reverend Castledine on the sofa, and Ed slumped into a chair on the opposite side of the room. After a few remarks about weather and crops, things got down to business.

"Romer," the reverend began, "we're concerned about the stories we're hearing about that dog of yours."

"My dog hasn't hurt anybody, Reverend," Romer said quietly.

"Well, that depends on how you look at it," Reverend Castledine said. "There're hurts of the body and hurts of the soul. If wonders are performed by demon power — and mind you, Romer, that's the only explanation for what's been happening around here — and if a Christian participates in events of this kind, then there's an injury to his immortal soul. A lot of folks' souls are in grave danger on account of these so-called healings —Charlie McGraw's, for instance."

Romer stared at the reverend for a moment. "Are you trying to say Charlie would be better off if he'd wasted away and died before he ever really lived?"

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The reverend nodded solemnly. "Without a doubt. Charlie's soul was ready to go to Jesus. Now he's been touched by the power of Satan, and who knows how far that might turn him from God's word?"

"*Praise* God!" Polly exclaimed, and the other ladies echoed her a little uncertainly, staring at their gloves.

"Seems to me," Ed Harding piped up, "that if good was done, then it's good. You can't go making evil out of something if it's already good to begin with, now can you?"

Polly shot Ed a look that probably withered his privates. Ed sank a little farther into his chair.

"What appears to be good may actually be evil masquerading," the reverend assured Ed. "Satan has sweet ways and a honeyed tongue."

"Maybe so," Romer admitted, "but he doesn't have four feet, long ears, and a tail." He stood up. "I think I've heard about all I want to about devil dogs, Reverend, ladies. I'd like you to leave now."

"Romer, Margie, I'm sorry," Ed said, getting up from the chair. "You know I don't agree with any of this. . . ." He seemed to be struggling to find a word he could use in front of Reverend Castledine.

"Bullshit," Romer supplied.

Ed nodded. "Bullshit." He went out the front door, and the others followed reluctantly. Reverend Castledine stopped just inside the door and turned back to Romer. "We're not the only ones who feel this way, you know. Some people are feeling mightly ugly about this. Sam Outerbridge for one, and he's got powerful friends. You'd best get rid of that dog now, before there's some sort of . . . you know . . . tragedy."

Romer took hold of the reverend's arm and placed him on the other side of the doorway. "The only tragedy's going to be what happens if anyone threatens my home or family. And that includes my dog!" he shouted at the reverend's back as the committee retreated down the drive. The Sunday crop of hopefuls was already filling up the yard.

That day, Pup did a land-office business in miracles; and that night, we could see people marching up and down the road outside the gate with signs and lit torches. I couldn't read the signs from that distance, but the general drift was easy to figure. Romer and Margie had a long talk in the kitchen after the twins had gone to bed, and when I got up the next morning, Romer was chaining the gate shut. When the crowds started arriving, Romer and Margie turned them away at the road. Most left po-

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litely, but some stayed to gaze at the house awhile, and of course the picketers stayed to march.

I put Pup in the barn on Romer's orders, and told Elvis and Annie they could feed and visit him in there, but they weren't to let him out for any reason.

"What did Pup do wrong, Dorsey?" Elvis asked me.

"Is Daddy mad at him?" asked Annie.

I sat down against the wall of the barn, and the twins sat down on either side of me. Once I could figure it out myself, I ought to be able to explain it to them. Behind us, Pup scratched at the other side of the wall and howled.

"Your daddy's not mad at Pup," I said, "but a lot of other people are. Reverend Castledine and Mrs. Harding and some other people, they think Pup's a bad dog, and your daddy ought to get rid of him."

"But I thought everybody was happy about the miracles," said Annie.

"Well, everybody needs miracles, like your daddy said," I told her, "but maybe not everybody's ready for them. Maybe sometimes people don't even know what a miracle is when they get one."

ROMER HUNG "No Trespassing" signs all over the property lines, and we tried to get back to normal as much as we could while listening to Pup cry and scratch at the barn wall. When all the fuss died down, Romer planned to fence in part of the yard and keep Pup in there, but right now he wanted him out of sight.

It wasn't like there weren't voices of reason speaking out in town — Ed Harding was one, and Andy McGraw was another, and of course old Mrs. Hendrix thought Pup was the second coming of Christ, but no one was paying any attention to that particular theory. It's just that, like always, the reasonable people were calm and quiet, and the foolish ones frothed at the mouth and attracted all the attention. So, for the next few days, the picketers still walked the fence by the highway in shifts, reading their Bibles out loud and waving signboards, and the miracle seekers still came as far as the gate and stared up the drive, hoping to catch sight of the celestial dog. Every now and again, someone would sneak over the fence, and Romer or I would have to escort them back, with apologies.

Romer didn't say a word about how much time the twins spent keeping Pup company in the day, but he wouldn't let them spend the night, and

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that was when the little fellow really got noisy. By the third night, the howls had given way to whines, and I was actually able to get to sleep without putting a pillow over my head.

Sometime in the middle of that night, I woke sitting straight up, but when I couldn't figure out why, I lay back down. I was on my way to sleep again, when it hit me. It was absolutely quiet.

My flashlight beam skittered around the barn, looking for what I already knew wasn't there; if Pup had been in there, he would have come bouncing up to the door as soon as I opened it. Finally I saw the board worked loose from its old nails, and the fresh earth where Pup had dug himself a way out.

Nest morning, he was back, a bit shamefaced, and we renailed the loose board, and then we renailed all the rest for good measure.

I think we really thought that would be the end of it, but a couple of hours later, Reverend Castledine and Sam Outerbridge and the ladies of the committee drove up to the gate. Sam and the reverend climbed over, but the ladies declined, having come straight from church in dresses and nylons. Romer and Margie came out to the porch to meet them, but this time no one put on any coffee.

"That dog of yours was seen in town last night," the reverend said. "I told you it would be best to get rid of it. Now there's likely to be some real trouble around here."

"It attacked Larry and Bobbie Olson's new baby," said Sam.

Margie gasped. "Pup attacked a baby?"

"That dog never attacked any baby," Romer said, laying a hand on Margie's arm. "Now why don't you tell me what really happened?"

"Larry and Bobbie just got their new baby home from the hospital," Sam reported, "and they went in to check on her last night and saw the dog standing in the crib. They already lost their first one to some kind of crib death last year, and this just about scared them out of their wits."

"So the dog was just standing there? He hadn't done anything?"

"Not yet," said the reverend, "but who knows? If the Lord hadn't been vigilant. . . ."

"If Moses hadn't parted the sea, he would've got his feet wet. What the hell makes you think that dog would've harmed that baby?"

"Why don't you just give us the dog, Romer?" Sam asked, stepping forward.

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"We're not giving you anything, Sam Outerbridge. You take the reverend here and get off my property. If you ever come back, you better come back shooting."

We all stood together on the porch and watched them retreat down the drive and back over the fence. We went about our usual business for the rest of the day, except that Romer found and oiled an old revolver of his daddy's and loaded it at the kitchen table with me and Margie and the twins watching him, and waiting for the dark.

When the dark came, they were back.

Sam Outerbridge was at the head of the delegation, carrying a twelve-gauge pump, and behind him were a handful of Romer's neighbors with a homegrown selection of rifles and shotguns. Polly Harding was on the front lines, armed with her Bible, which she aimed at us as though she might riddle us with holiness. Flashlight beams played along the ground as the last of the night visitors brought up the rear. I recognized a lot of people I knew, a lot of people Romer had called his friends up until tonight, but none of them would look him in the eye.

Romer came out carrying the revolver, but when he saw all the guns aimed up on the porch, and all the nervous faces behind them, his arm fell down to his side and he laid the gun down. "Why don't you let me send my family inside?" he proposed to Sam, but Sam shook his head. "Everybody stays out here where I can see them. That way, there won't be any trouble."

"There's already trouble," Margie said, pulling the twins close to her. "And you're making it. What gives you the right to come here and threaten my children?"

Sam removed his hat. "We're just doing what has to be done, Mrs. Wills."

"We're here to do the Lord's work, as some others won't," Polly said.

Pup began to howl from the barn, so no one had to ask where he was. "Don't try to stop us, Romer," was all Sam would say, and Reverend Castledine, who was standing kind of nervously to one side of the crowd, added, "We don't want anyone to get hurt."

In the end, all Romer could do was keep Margie and the twins behind him while three of his neighbors kept us on the porch with their guns, and the rest of them went into the barn to do what they came to do. The twins clung to their mama and bawled, and the men guarding the family shuffled their feet and looked at the ground. I was closest to the barn and

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was ready to go over the porch rail, but Romer stopped me with a look. There was a blast from the barn, and a yelp, and it was quiet for just a moment until the twins started crying again. Then we heard the sound of hammering nails.

The committee came out of the barn and walked down the drive without looking back, their flashlights sweeping the ground before them like sniffing hound dogs. The other three turned and followed them. Reverend Castledine stopped in front of the porch and said, "It had to be done. I hope you understand that."

Romer turned his back on him and took his family into the house. I took Pup down from the barn wall so they'd never have to see, and the next day we buried him for the last time under the big oak.

A couple of months later, Margie found out she was expecting again —sort of a last gift from Pup. No one ever said anything about getting a new dog, and except for strange silences that passed from one to another of us on a glance at the barn or the back door, no one ever mentioned the old one. You might say things got back to normal, but we all knew they could never be the same. After the harvest was in, I left the farm and hitchhiked to Oregon, and though Romer and I never discussed it, I know he understood why. I think he would have taken his family and gone away, too, if he'd been able.

Pup never asked to be different, or to have people need what he offered so bad that their need twisted itself into hate and death. Like all dogs —and all people, too, I guess — he just wanted to be himself and be loved. I've spent a lot of time thinking about what happened, and I've come to believe that what they did to Pup wasn't as much an unusual thing as it seemed — it's really just the sort of thing that happens somewhere every day.

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Harry has been writing full time for nearly a year now. He is working on a number of projects, including an sf novel. His most recent novel, The Long Roll, *was published in hardcover by Ballantine last fall. "I don't quite know what to say about 'Vermin,'" he writes. "I got the idea for the Haldos' reproductive methods from the PBS show 'Nature' — the second story idea I've taken from that program, so maybe the idiot box is worth something after all. I wrote the piece with as much tactile imagery as I could put into it: I was looking to make the reader itch and sweat." He did both, and managed to combine it with a good science fiction story. "Vermin" provided the inspiration for this month's cover.*

Vermin

By Harry Turtledove

THE HEAVY BUT familiar weight of the water jar pressed into Victoria Griffin's left hip as she walked back from the street toward her husband's cabin. Sweat slithered down her face, prickled in her armpits, greased the crevice between her buttocks so that she was unpleasantly aware of her own flesh sliding against itself. The heavy wool dress that covered all of her but head, hands, and feet made her want to scratch everywhere at once, as if it were a hair shirt.

She forced facial muscles into an expression of determined serenity. Serenity was the expression most often seen along the paths of New Zion. The Holy Mission Church taught that, since the body was the chief source of sin, all its sensations were to be mistrusted, and ignored as far as possible. On a steam bath of a planet like Reverence, that was not always easy.

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Serenity sagged toward exhaustion. Endless jungle heat and humidity made the task of building Reverence into a perfect world all the more daunting. Once in a great while, as now, the Devil tempted Victoria to wish the Church had enjoyed the secular wealth to pick a more salubrious planet on which to pasture its flock. She knew the wish was sinful. Later she would spend hours on aching knees repenting of it. But the water came first.

The path was muddy (the path was always muddy). One of Victoria's feet flew out from under her. "Jesus' name!" she cried in the moment before the ground slammed her backside. Even as she fell, she grabbed for the water jar. Too late. It hit a rock and smashed. A sharp sherd sliced her thumb, almost to the bone.

Filthy, bleeding, and crying, she staggered to her feet. Wet, slimy earth glued her dress to her haunches. Normally, that would have disgusted her. Now she hardly noticed. She squeezed the torn flesh of her thumb together, trying to stem the flow of blood. Drawn by the iron smell, the animated pinheads that were vermin scuttled down her arm.

Victoria let go of her thumb to smash a couple of the tiny pests, but more soon took their place. She hated bugs of every description; they made her cringe inside. But bugs of every description was what Reverence had. She looked daggers in the direction of the Haldol village a couple of miles away. Like all Haldol villages, it was awash in offal, a perfect breeding place for the crawling horrors that were only too happy to infest New Zion as well. The settlers fumigated their cabins again and again. It did no lasting good, not with the Haldols and their corruption so close.

One of the vermin bit her on the inside of the thigh, so high up that even her husband's touch there felt wicked. On top of everything else that had just happened, that was too much. She let out a high, piercing note of pure outrage. And exactly then, of course, Cornelia Baker came round the corner with an empty jug.

Cornelia's big blue eyes went round and wide. "Why, Victoria!" She gasped. "*Are* you all right?"

"I think so,"Victoria said through clenched teeth. Cornelia Baker somehow managed perfect cleanliness and perfect neatness on a raw colonial world. Even the sheen of sweat that glistened on her face might have been taken for a virtuous glow. It was impossible to imagine a bloodsucking bug being so rude as to bite her high up on the thigh. She

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boasted every Christian virtue, and flaunted them as well.

Now she took efficient charge of Victoria. She brushed the worst of the muck from Victoria's dress, threw a strong (and somehow, even after that tidying job, not particularly dirty) arm around her shoulder, and half-led, half-supported her back to New Zion. All the while she chattered on with such aggressively sincere sympathy that Victoria wanted to claw out those big blue eyes.

Victoria wanted to claw at herself as well. The biting bug, or perhaps a different biting bug, had decided to pierce her right between her legs. To scratch herself there made Victoria's cheeks flame crimson even when she was alone. To scratch herself there in front of anyone would have been lewd and indecent, and possibly good for time in the pillory. To scratch herself there in front of Cornelia Baker was hideously unimaginable.

But the biter would not relent. To make matters worse, it kept looking for new, tender spots; she felt it crawling slowly through her secret hair. She could also feel the gooseflesh rising on her arms and legs at every new motion of the bug, no matter how tiny. The horrible anticipation of its next move brought her worse pain than any from her torn thumb or bruised behind.

At last, in front of Victoria's cabin, Cornelia said, "Here we are, my dear. I do hope you'll be better soon. God bless you."

"God bless you, Cornelia, and thank you for all your help," Victoria said, when she would sooner have screamed, *Just go away!*

Finally Cornelia did go away. Victoria bolted inside the cabin, locked the door behind her. She shuttered the two small windows, pausing at the second one to dip her head in the direction of the church steeple she could see through it.

With all the openings closed, the inside of the cabin turned night-dark. That suited Victoria. She hardly saw and deliberately did not look at the pale flesh she revealed when she stripped off her soiled and soaked dress. She did her best not to notice the puff of air that cooled her for a moment as the dress went off over her head.

Both her other dresses were dirty. She'd intended to wash them after she brought the water home. Now, instead, she quickly picked one and threw it on. Only when she was properly clothed did she wrap a rag around her thumb. And only after that did she look to the ceiling so she would not have to watch her unhurt hand as it tried to rout the biter from her private parts.

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She gasped in relief, then gasped again when she thought how the first gasp might sound — no one could possibly hear it, but it shamed her all the same. Then the barred door rattled, and she gasped again. Someone was trying to get into the cabin. "Who's there?" she called shrilly.

"Only me, Mrs. Griffin," a deep voice replied. "May I please come in?"

She ran to the door, threw up the bar. "Of course, Mr. Griffin," she answered, and stood aside to let her husband by. "I didn't expect you back from the fields so soon."

"Broke my hoe handle," he answered, scowling. He pointed to the path outside, where he'd dropped the ruined tool. "Have to shape myself a new one." Then he finally seemed to take a good look at Victoria. "By the hope of Heaven, Mrs. Griffin, what's befallen you?"

Victoria went through the whole sorry tale (leaving out only Cornelia Baker's attitude, which no man could be expected to understand). When she finished, her husband's gaze flicked toward the kitchen. The cabin was too dark for him to see what was there, but he knew anyhow. He said, "We have no other water jar."

"No, Mr. Griffin, we don't. "Victoria fought down a flare of resentment — he might have spoken of her hurts before the household's. But he was right. "I've been meaning to go into the Haldol village to dicker for another one, but —" She could not continue. She hated hiking to the Haldol village, not on account of the walk itself, but because the village and all the Haldols in it crawled with vermin.

"No buts," her husband said firmly. "Tomorrow you must get a new one. Now you will excuse me, I hope. I have a great deal of work still to do this day."

He went out behind the cabin. Victoria heard him rummaging through the sticks piled there, then the snick-snick of his knife cutting the end of one of them to fit the shank of the hoe blade. After a while, he grunted in satisfaction. His footsteps receded down the path.

Sighing, Victoria bundled up the two dresses she was not wearing — water from the wet, muddy one promptly soaked her breasts and belly all over again — with some of her husband's overalls and carried them down to the stream to wash. She hadn't planned to do the washing for another couple of days, but she hadn't planned to fall in a puddle, either.

Her knees clicked and complained as she knelt by the bank of the stream. She scrubbed the clothes against a wooden washboard, rasping her

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knuckles with every stroke. Gooey lye soap burned the raw patches and slowly, so slowly, worked dirt free from wool. In New Zion's ever-humid air, the clothes would dry even more slowly.

She looked upstream. It was only a quick glance, but she muttered a prayer of contrition as she averted her eyes. Upstream from New Zion, only a few miles away in distance, but centuries in technology and light-years in attitude, lay the new Federation research base on Reverence — *the godless Federation's godless research base,* she thought. Its gleaming metal walls, the whip and bowl antennas that linked the base to the thousands of other worlds in the Federation — all were anathema to the way of life the Holy Mission Church had worked for the past three generations to build here.

She picked up the bundle of clean, wet clothes. By now she was so soaked herself that a little more water no longer bothered her. She made sure, though, to carry the bundle in front of her as if it were a shield, so no one in the village could see how immodestly the damp dress she was wearing clung to her.

Once she'd spread dresses and overalls out to dry by her cabin, she went back to the stream yet again with a couple of small jars to get enough water for the night's cooking. She had to make two trips, which left her gloomy as she began chopping turnips. Mr. Griffin was right, without a shadow of a doubt. Tomorrow, no matter how much she loathed them, she would have to get a new jar from the Haldols.

Her husband came in from the fields again not long before sunset. He spoke a long grace over supper; Victoria bent her head and prayed with him. When they were finished, she carried the dishes into the kitchen. He ignited a stick of punk at the fireplace; in their desire for a life of biblical simplicity, those who followed the way of the Holy Mission Church eschewed electricity.

Victoria came out, sank wearily into a chair. The hard seat was a trial to her sore backside, but she tried to will away the discomfort. The day had been long and taxing. But Mr. Griffin said, "Why are you sitting in idleness, with plates and pots yet to clean?"

"With our jug broken, I haven't the water here to wash them, and I am too worn to travel to the stream two or three more times to fetch it. I shall clean them tomorrow, when I have a new jug, if that is pleasing to you, Mr. Griffin." She did her best to make her voice sweet and persuasive.

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Her husband would have been within his rights to order her into action, but he only grunted. He was tired, too.

After a while, he said, ""If you like, Mrs. Griffin, I will read you a passage of Scripture, that the idleness may be improved."

"Yes, thank you," Victoria said eagerly, glad he had decided not to make an issue of the dishes.

The Bible was the only book in the cabin. Her husband kissed the wooden cover that protected the precious pages from long-ago Earth. He held the volume close to the fattest candle. Twilight was already gone from the sky; night at New Zion fell with tropical swiftness. "This is the Book of Judges, the second chapter, the first verse," he said, and paused to scratch his thick brown beard before he began: "'And the angel of the Lord came up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said: . . .'"

Leaning a little to one side on her chair to favor her bruised hindquarter, Victoria listened to Mr. Griffin read. They had not been married long; this was only their second trip through the Holy Scriptures together. Older couples in New Zion read the sacred words twelve, fifteen, even twenty times, and always seemed to find something new and rewarding in them.

After several chapters, Mr. Griffin caught himself in a yawn. "That's enough for tonight, I think," he said, shutting the Bible and setting it back on its stand on the mantel. He went around the room blowing out candles, picked up the one by whose light he'd read. "Shall we go to bed, Mrs. Griffin?"

"As you say, Mr. Griffin." Victoria got up and followed him into the bedroom. He set the candle in a stand on the small chest of drawers by the bed. Then he and Victoria knelt side by side and prayed the day's last prayers.

He turned his head and blew out the candle. The small, hot bedroom plunged into darkness. Victoria could not see her hand in front of her face as she lay down.

Her husband joined her in bed a moment later. As they had prayed side by side, so they lay side by side. She felt the mattress shift, heard the small, soft sounds of fasteners opening as he undid part of his overalls. *So,* she thought, and spread her legs for him.

He rolled onto her without a word, his weight and the heavy smell of him a familiar burden. His right hand pulled her dress up to her waist, bundled it between them. His left, for a moment, closed on her right breast.

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After a couple of squeezes that brought hurt and pleasure mixed, he took it away. Then, brusquely, he thrust himself into her.

That hurt, too; she was still dry. The rough cloth of his overalls chafed against her inner thighs, and against the new bites there. She opened her legs wider. The motion, though intended as one of escape, helped ease his way. A few more thrusts, and he was lodged to the hilt.

His harsh exhalations stirred the soft down of her cheek. His passage in and out of her grew smoother. She felt herself tighten around him. Of itself, her back arched as she awaited the gathering sweetness of each new thrust.

He grunted above her, quivered briefly, and stopped. All his weight came down on her, so she could hardly breathe. As he withdrew, she felt a pang of frustrated longing. Congress between man and wife was one of the few pleasures the Church of the Holy Mission sanctioned. To have that pleasure cut short before its peak — Victoria sighed. It usually was.

Mr. Griffin flopped back to his side of the bed. Victoria rearranged her dress so it decently covered her once more. "May God grant us a child," she said. They'd had a daughter a year and a half before, but she'd died inside of three months. The empty place she had left still ached inside Victoria.

Her husband did not answer. He had already started to snore. She sighed again — quietly, so she would not disturb him. She lay on her back, staring up at the blackness of the ceiling. Of itself, her hand pressed at the place where her legs joined, this time not to scratch, but to finish what Mr. Griffin had begun. But the first twinge of sensation made her guiltily snatch it away. "Sinful," she whispered, reminding herself. "Shameful."

After a long while, she slept.

BREAKFAST WAS a heel of bread. The butter was going bad; in Reverence's climate, it would not keep no matter what she did. The rancid taste lingered in Victoria's mouth as she loaded iron tools into her basket for the trip to Haldol village. Having to make that trip left a bad taste in her mouth, too.

At the edge of the jungle, she turned to look back at New Zion. She felt like one of the Hebrews doomed to wander in the desert for forty years. No help for it, though. Treading carefully to keep from falling again, she started down the narrow, winding track that led from the human settlement to that of the Haldols.

Reverence's jungle was far more alien to her than the long-ago desert of

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Sinai had been to the Hebrews. Even the green of the foliage was brighter, shinier, a touch more yellow than the honest green of the Earthly plants that fed New Zion. When she brushed into them, the leaves felt velvety against the skin of her hands and face. Smells went in swift succession from lasciviously sweet to stinks worse than any outhouse.

Bugs were everywhere — bugs on the velvety leaves, bugs on the ground, bugs flying through the air. Victoria swatted at herself, but she might as well have been Pharaoh, trying to hold back the inrushing Red Sea. Even in New Zion, bugs were a torment. In the jungle, they were a plague. She thought again of Pharaoh as many-legged wriggling things tickled between her breasts, ran up and down her legs, tried to crawl into her ears and nostrils. By the horror they raised in her, they might have been Satan's imps.

The closer she drew to the Haldol village, the thicker the bugs became and the more of them were the pinhead-sized biters that particularly afflicted Reverence's natives — and Victoria. She was all but trembling when the jungle abruptly ended and the clearing round the village began. A tall yellow Haldol spotted her and let out a trilling yeep that momentarily silenced the racket in the market square.

Everyone in the square came rushing toward her, yeeping and whistling and calling out, "Good day! God bless you!" in shrilly accented English. The Haldols resembled nothing so much as stick people whose ancestors had been salamanders. Their skins were hairless, and as slick and moist as the inside of her cheek, their eyes huge and round and altogether black. They wore no clothes. Their genitals looked enough like those of human beings to make Victoria's cheeks heat on seeing them.

Worse even than those shamelessly and openly displayed genitals were the red warty patches on the sides of the males' necks. Not only did they look creviced and diseased, but a faint odor of rotting meat came from them. The Haldols never seemed to notice it, but it twisted Victoria's stomach and brought a flow of nauseous saliva to her mouth.

And worst of all were the vermin. She watched them crawl blithely over the Haldols' smooth, shiny skin, now and then pausing to feed. The Haldols paid no special attention to them, not even when the vermin came to rest on their private parts. She squirmed, remembering her own torments of the day before.

The vermin seemed fond of the Haldols' privates. *Why not?* she thought

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—they were filthy creatures, and had to be naturally drawn to filthy places. They also congregated around the males' warty, stinking neck patches. And from the Haldols, they were happy enough to crawl onto Victoria. She squirmed again, this time at the feather touch of tiny feet.

"What do you want, *pisquaa*?" One of the males squealed. The Haldol epithet for humans meant something like *silly person wrapped up in big leaves*. Haldols thought humans endlessly amusing. It wasn't mutual, not to the serious folk who went about God's work at New Zion.

"I need a new water jug," Victoria answered. She spoke no Haldol; few colonists did. The male who had asked her the question translated her reply into his own high-pitched speech.

His companions chattered excitedly. A water jug was serious business. "I show you!" the male said. "No, I!" another one broke in. A third, one evidently without English, pointed to his own skinny chest. Victoria vowed she would never chaffer with him.

Several more of the tall yellow natives darted into their huts, to emerge in moments with jugs to thrust into Victoria's face. The Haldols were such excellent potters that no one at New Zion followed that trade anymore. But the natives were ignorant of metalwork. They squawked in delight when Victoria displayed the assortment of nails, knife blades, and other iron tools she'd brought with her.

She quickly waved away a couple of would-be jug sellers whose wares were obscenely decorated. The Haldols had no sense of decency; they believed anything that was right to do was also right to depict. Anyone in New Zion depraved enough to buy such wares would spend time in the stocks.

Some of the potters were greedy. They wanted more tools than she was willing to part with. After a while, she was down to dickering with only three males. She liked all their pots. One in particular had lines of almost perfect smoothness. When she lifted it and set it against her hip, the pot fit as if it had grown there. But she did not want the Haldol to know she was especially fond of his pot, so she also made sure to admire the jugs the other two set before her.

The haggling went on most of the morning. That was partly because New Zion was not rich enough in iron to waste it for no good cause, and partly because Victoria hated to get the short end of a bargain, even if accepting it would have let her sooner leave the village she loathed.

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The Haldols not directly involved in the haggling returned to their own pursuits, as unselfconsciously as if she had not been there. Some went out into the jungle to forage for the animals and fruits on which they lived. A disappointed potter, one with whom Victoria had chosen not to deal, began to shape a clay coil into a new vessel. Young Haldols scampered here and there, screaming at one another; they were even louder and shriller than their elders. A female spitted a still-writhing lizardly creature on a sharp stick and held it over the fire.

Haldols casually relieved themselves in the open. Victoria tried not to look, lowering her eyes to the water jugs and to the metal she was offering in exchange (that last was a sensible precaution in any case, as knife blade or nails might otherwise inexplicably ascend to Heaven). But the sharp, foul stink of the natives' droppings fought against the burnt-meat smell of the roasting (and still-squirming) lizard.

She finally shook her head once too often at one of the Haldol potters. With dignity, he picked up his jug and walked away. Now she faced only two males, the one whose pot she really wanted, and one whose work she would take if the other kept insisting on an exorbitant price.

Sensing that the dicker was heating up, more Haldols strolled over to watch and to be in at the climax. Just behind her preferred potter, a male Haldol ran his hands down the flanks and over the breastless chest of the female beside him. The female's mouth took the *O* shape that was a Haldol's smile. She turned toward the male, reached out, and took his member in her hand.

Again Victoria lowered her eyes to the pots — again and again. Of themselves, her eyes kept returning to the Haldol couple, who went about coupling as nonchalantly as if they were the only souls (damned souls, surely, for their heathen lack of shame, but souls nonetheless) for miles about. She'd seen animals mate countless times, back in New Zion, but animals were only animals, and only slightly embarrassing. Haldols were people, of a sort.

The female sank gracefully to her knees in the mud. Her mouth closed on the male's organ. Victoria's cheeks were incandescent. Any woman who performed such lewdness — any man base or lascivious enough to demand it — the stocks or the pillory could not be enough. They would kick their lives away on the gibbet . . . if they did not burn.

Then the female went down on all fours. The male knelt beside her.

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They joined like dogs. The Haldols, used to such horrid sights, found the bargaining over the water jar more interesting than they did their linked fellows. Victoria's cheeks grew hotter still as she watched the couple's slow, deliberate movements. Unexpectedly, mortifyingly, she also knew heat in her loins, the same frustrating, incomplete warming Mr. Griffin sometimes brought her in the darkness.

More anxious than ever to escape this cesspit of iniquity, she closed the deal with the Haldol potter she preferred faster than she might have. He beeped and squeaked his glee as she passed him nails and blades and fishhooks. The other potter glumly walked away, no doubt wishing the human would have been so generous to him.

The copulating Haldols finished at last. They got up, pulled some green leaves off a vine to wipe the mud from their lower legs and from the female's hands. The ignored the vermin crawling over the rest of their bodies, which would have distressed Victoria worse than any mud. Vermin even crept inside the female's distended genital slit. The sight made Victoria's stomach churn. So did the way the Haldol did nothing to drive them away, but went right on talking to the male with whom she'd just mated.

Victoria snatched up the water jug and fled. "Good-bye, *pisquaa*," the Haldol potter called after her. "God bless you."

At that moment, she was convinced God would bless her most if He arranged for her never to have to set foot in the Haldol village again.

"They are d*irty* creatures," Victoria said to Cornelia Baker when she walked by the next morning.

"Who, the Haldols?" Cornelia's mouth narrowed into a thin, disapproving line. "Of course they are, my dear. They reject the true and living God, the only true morality. Why do you think we go so seldom to their villages?" Her eyes widened in perfectly realistic sympathy. "But then, you had to visit them yesterday, didn't you? The water jug. I do hope you're better from your fall."

"Yes, thank you." Victoria ground her teeth. Somehow it seemed impossible to imagine Cornelia Baker with vermin crawling through her pubic hair, with bloodsucking vermin piercing her glazed, flawless skin — what would they find for nourishment under there? But she was not only a human being, but of the flock of the Church of the Holy Mission, and

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Victoria's repugnance at all she'd witnessed among the Haldols came out: "They are *so* vile. Public filth, public lewdness —"

Cornelia looked at her avidly. "*What* did you see?"

"I cannot even bring myself to describe it," Victoria said. She was so full of disgust that she did not notice Cornelia's expression change to one of disappointment. "And the Haldol vermin were everywhere. How can they live that way?"

"They are dirty, as you said," Cornelia answered. "Another good reason to avoid them when we can. Is that a new bite on your cheek?"

Victoria's hand flew up to the injured spot. "Er — yes," she said, and knew she risked eternal damnation for the lie. Mr. Griffin had put that bruise there. He was not a hard man; he'd hit her only once for not having their home in proper order when he returned from the fields. Getting the new water jug from the Haldols had taken up too much of the day for her to finish the rest of the chores. But it was her own fault that the old jug had broken, so how could she complain?

"I do wish we could be rid of the Haldols' vermin; I will say that," Cornelia said. "Even the Haldols would benefit thereby. Surely they suffer worse from disease for being so constantly afflicted with those cursed crawling pinheads."

Victoria did not care whether the base and lewd Haldols benefited; by her best guess, the vermin that swarmed over them were a judgment like unto that which God had visited upon the sinful Egyptians. But how was divine justice serviced by having New Zion also suffer for the natives' vile profligacy? Try as she might, she could see no answer to that question.

No more, however, could she see how to be rid of the vermin. She said as much: "The Holy Mission Church long ago forswore the devilish arts we would need to kill off the bugs." As if to remind her they were still there, one of them bit her on the inside of the ankle. She rubbed the wounded part against her other leg. Sometimes that crushed the little pests. More often, as now, the bug simply shifted its attack.

Cornelia Baker's voice went soft and sly: "We have not the devilish arts, but those at the Federation base may well."

"But they are as godless as the Haldol," Victoria gasped, trying again — and again without success — to kill the biter that was tormenting her. "They are worse, for, being human, they should be of His flock." The folk of New Zion had had no intercourse with the base in the two years since

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it had been established. They had also firmly made it known that no one not of the Holy Mission Church was welcome in their town.

"How better and more just to overthrow the Devil than through his own instruments?" Cornelia asked.

That was sound dogma. Victoria knew it. She also knew Cornelia was tempting her, trying to get her to be the one to step beyond the bounds of what was proper. "Mr. Griffin would never permit me to seek out the ones who have turned their backs on the Lord," she said. The bug bit her leg again, this time in the fold of skin at the back of her knee. A drop of blood — or maybe it was just sweat — slid wetly down her calf.

"Will you let him keep you from serving the greater glory of God?" Cornelia said.

"Proper obedience —" Before Victoria could say anything further, the biter sank its piercing beak into her flesh once more. It was not a sign like the burning bush, or like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, but she was no great prophet or saint, to deserve a great sign. She took the small one for what she thought it meant, and said, "Perhaps I will go after all."

"God will bless you for it," Cornelia exclaimed fervently, her eyes glowing at the prospect of His work being done . . . and also at the prospect of its being done at no risk to herself

The federation research base was farther from New Zion than was the Haldol village. If Victoria went there, she would surely be gone the greater part of a day. Mr. Griffin would probably hit her again, maybe more than once this time. She rubbed her cheek, wondering if she really wanted to take that chance.

Better a beating now and then, she thought, than this constant torment from vermin. As if to underscore the point, the Haldol pinhead crawling up her leg probed her again with its red-hot needle of a snout.

"Yes, perhaps I shall go after all," she said, swatting at herself. Cornelia Baker smiled.

THE HALDOL village, while disguising, was at least disgusting in a comprehensible way. Victoria's knees wobbled from fear as much as from fatigue as she finally drew near the Federation research base. For all she knew, the godless scientists inside were waiting to strip her soul from her body with one of their machines and send it straight to the eternal fire. She didn't know whether they could do

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that, but she thought they might be able to. Why would the Holy Mission Church so completely have rejected science if it did not emanate from Satan? Only the thought of getting rid of the vermin that constantly tortured her, that she hated and feared, kept her going forward.

A woman's voice spoke from out of the air. "Hello there. You're one of the Churchies, aren't you? What are you doing here? We thought you people didn't want anything to do with us."

Victoria had trouble following the quick, sharp accent so different from that of her own folk. After a moment, she managed to stammer out an answer: "I—I need to talk with you people about — about something to help the Haldols."

"Do you?" the unseen woman said. Victoria thought she sounded dubious. "Well, come on, then. No reason we can't talk about it."

The research base was a single low, immense building, taking up almost as much space on the ground as the entire village of New Zion. A pair of big glass panes were in the size and shape of a double door, but Victoria saw no handle. "How do I go in?" she asked.

Without warning, and with no human agency she could detect, the glass panes, hissed apart from each other. Startled and alarmed, she drew back apace. "Come in if you're coming," the woman said, sharply now. "Don't just stand there letting out all our nice, conditioned air."

Muttering a prayer, Victoria walked into the base. The doors closed behind her with another soft hiss. She shivered. No wonder the Holy Mission Church had turned its back on technology, if technology could make ordinary objects like doors behave as if they were infused with life.

She shivered again. She'd lived all her life in Reverence's tropical humidity. Now, for the first time, she felt air that wasn't hot and sticky. It seemed chilly and wrong, but only or a moment. After that, it was delicious — *seductive* was another word that sprang into her mind. This was technology, too, she realized, technology luring man away from honest reality and into luxurious indolence.

The people inside the research base did not seem indolent. They bustled back and forth, going into a doorway here, popping out of one there. Despite the unnaturally cool air, they wore only brightly colored singlets and shorts. Victoria needed most of a minute to realize that some of the people so dressed were women. She blushed and cast her eyes to the floor at the indecent display of flesh. It was almost as bad as what she'd witnessed at

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the Haldol village — almost. *Nothing* could be that bad.

"Good heavens, deary, when *did* you last bathe?" By the voice, it was the woman Victoria had heard outside. Victoria had to look at her. She was in her late twenties, a few years older than Victoria, with light-brown hair cut shorter than any woman in New Zion wore it, gray eyes, and open, friendly features. From the neck up, she looked like a nice person. From the neck down . . . an orange singlet that clung to the bosom tightly enough to reveal the outline of nipples, green shorts that molded themselves to the buttocks, had to be devices of the Devil to incite sensuality.

And the question she'd asked, and the way she'd asked it — "A few days ago," Victoria answered, more than a little defiantly. She didn't smell any different from anyone else in New Zion; she smelled the way a person was supposed to smell. Gathering her spirit, she looked the strange woman in the face, asked, "When did you last pray?"

The woman blinked. "It's been longer than a few days; I'll tell you that. But I already knew your priorities were different from mine. Fair enough. My name is Janice; who are you?" She held out her hand as if she were a man.

Scandalized yet again, Victoria took it. She gave her own name. Then she blurted, "Can you help me? I've come on account of the vermin."

"The vermin?" Janice frowned. A tiny vertical line appeared between her eyebrows. "I think you need to tell me more. Why don't you come along into my office so we can talk?"

Victoria followed her. A whole wall of the office was filled with — at first she thought they were windows. Then she realized they had to be something more. One showed the way she had come — this Janice must have seen her as she approached. The woman waved her to a chair. It was softer and conformed more closely to her shape than any that would have been tolerated in New Zion. Its very comfort made her want to squirm. Janice gave her a glass of something cold. "Is it spirituous?" Victoria asked suspiciously.

"Is it what?" Janice asked. She spoke to something on her desk. Victoria almost got up and left when the desk answered. But Janice turned to her and said, "No, it has no alcohol."

Partially reassured, she took a small sip. Whatever it was, it was sweet and very cold, colder than stream water ever got. She felt it slide all the way down inside her when she swallowed. She took another sip, and another.

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Pretty soon the glass was empty. Victoria set it aside and said, "Now. About the vermin."

"Go ahead," Janice said. "Tell me about the vermin."

Victoria told her, not so much about the vermin themselves, as about her trip to the Haldol village. She even found herself stammering out the story of what the male and female Haldol had done right before her eyes, and how the vermin ambled over their slick, moist skins while they did it. (She would never have spoken of such things back in New Zion, but Janice, by the way she dressed and by the fact that she did not belong to the Holy Mission Church, seemed a harlot herself, and thus unlikely to be offended.) Victoria finished, "It's just — disgusting. It can't be healthy for them — the Haldols, I mean — either."

"You surprise me, you really do," Janice said. "From all I'd ever heard, none of you Churchies gave a damn about the Haldols."

"They *are* damned," Victoria said. *So are you*, she added to herself.

"Never mind; that's not quite what I meant." Janice frowned, considering. "We probably could get rid of the parasites for you, if that's what you want. Are you really sure that's what you want?"

Something in the way she asked the question warned Victoria it had teeth (after a moment, she figured out what it was: this Janice woman sounded like Cornelia Baker). She asked, "Why shouldn't it be what I really want?"

"Well, what do you think will happen with the Haldols if they aren't constantly pestered by disease-carrying vermin?" Janice asked.

"They'll be healthier, like I said. Why shouldn't I want them to be healthier?" Victoria wondered if she and Janice were speaking the same language.

Janice said, "Yes, I think you're right; I think they will be healthier. Not only that, I think their children won't die young so often. I think they'll grow up and have lots of little Haldols of their own."

"Good. Maybe, God willing, we'll be able to convert them to proper love for Jesus Christ." Babies who died young — even Haldol babies — touched Victoria's heart.

Janice studied her as if she were a bug herself. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?"

"If we fix it so the Haldols don't die young, there are going to be more

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Haldols. They'll need more and more land, too. What will you Churchies do then? They're native to this world, and you're not. Odds are, they'll overwhelm you in a few generations. That's how evolution works, you know."

Victoria didn't know. Evolution was evil; she was certain of that. That certainty was the beginning and end of her knowledge on the subject. Of one thing, however, she was even more certain. "The Lord will provide for us," she said confidently. A pinhead bit her, just below her left breast. She shuddered. She was also sure that having those accursed vermin dead now mattered more to her than anything a few generations down the road. Her great-grandchildren, if she ever had any, could take care of themselves. All she wanted was to be free of welts.

"The Lord will provide, will he, deary?" Janice no longer seemed open and friendly. Again she reminded Victoria of Cornelia — Cornelia looking for a way to get someone else into trouble at no expense to herself. "If that's what you want, I'm willing to give it to you. Far as I can see, it'll serve you right. You people have no business on this planet in the first place."

"Why do you hate us so much?" The hostility of the Federation research worker's response rocked Victoria. "What did we ever do to you?"

"You know-nothings have been holding back the advance of knowledge for the past two thousand years," Janice said. "If you had your way, all of humanity would be back on Earth, living in filthy huts like yours, starving one year in three, and going off to war over the nature of God. As far as I'm concerned, the faster people who think like you die out, the better off we'll all be. So I'll do just what you asked, because I think that's the quickest way to be rid of you for good."

Shaking, Victoria started to tell her to forget the whole idea. Then she realized it was too late for that; Janice was certain to try to get rid of the vermin now, just to hurt the Church of the Holy Mission as much as she could. Victoria's voice wobbled as she said, "You seem just as sure you have the only right way to do things as we are. We at least have faith to sustain us. What sustains you?"

Before Janice could answer, she happened to glance down at her arm. Like a wandering pinhead, a Haldol bug crawled through the fine hair there. With a cry of disgust, she crushed it between her thumb and forefinger. "I should have had you fumigated before I ever let you in here."

"What does 'fumigated' mean?" Victoria asked.

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"You sure wouldn't know, would you, Churchie? You just go on home now. We'll take care of the bugs for you; I promise you that." When Janice got to her feet, she carefully examined herself to make sure no other vermin from Victoria had attached themselves to her. Victoria averted her eyes, not caring for the sensual thoughts roused by the sight of Janice's hands sliding over her smooth flesh (how did the woman have no hair on her legs?) She knew Janice was not caressing herself for the pleasure of it, but that was still how it looked.

"Go on," Janice said again. "Out of here. I'll clean up after you." As Victoria left the office and headed for the door by which she'd entered, the woman from the research base followed her with a metal tube that sent forth a sweetly noxious vapor. "Want me to spray you, too?"

"No, thank you," Victoria said with as much dignity as she could muster. She didn't mind smelling the way she smelled, and going back to New Zion literally reeking of technology was unthinkable.

"Keep your vermin, then," Janice said. "I don't know why I bothered to ask; you'd just pick up another set of them on the way home. And we will get rid of them in a bit — just remember, you asked for it." With that, she touched a button. The glass doors hissed open. Victoria stepped through. The doors closed. Inside the base, Janice sprayed where she had stood.

The outside air smote Victoria like a warm, wet fist. She'd found the climate trying enough, living in it every moment of her life. Now, after an hour or two in — what had Janice called it? — conditioned air, she realized just how dreadful the weather was.

By the time she got back to New Zion, sweat plastered her heavy wool dress to her until it was almost as obscenely tight as Janice's outfit had been. The rough fabric prickled against the soft skin of her belly and flanks. She tugged at the dress, trying to pull it away, but no sooner did she let go than it stuck again.

She did not see Cornelia Baker anywhere about. That, she thought, was as well. She turned off the central street toward her own cabin. It would be good to get home. Then her stomach did a flip-flop, and she felt cold in spite of the weather. Her husband stood outside the front door, waiting for her, his thick arms folded across his chest. His fists were clenched.

She dipped her head to him. "Good even, Mr. Griffin."

"Where have you been?" His voice seemed to rumble out from somewhere deep inside him. "Nothing's done here. Have you been slothfully

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idling again?"

"No, Mr. Griffin, I've not been idling," Victoria said, deciding not to notice that unjust *again*. "I'm sorry I didn't do as much here as I might have today; the walk to and from the Federation research base took longer than I thought it would."

He stared at her. She'd given him an answer he'd not looked for. It was not, however, one he approved of. "Did Satan possess you, to make you want to visit that godless place?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Griffin," she said. *I will not fear him*, she told herself uselessly. "I thought they might have a way to rid the Haldols — and us — of the crawling vermin that torment our lives. They said they did — they said they would." She did not repeat what else the woman named Janice had said. She trusted God to know who His true followers on Reverence were, and to protect them.

"Technology," he said in that rumbling, fateful voice. "You went seeking technology. Technology is the Whore of Babylon, as well you know."

"Yes, Mr. Griffin," she whispered. The elders of the Church of the Holy Mission drummed that into every child on New Zion. Still, though, she tried to defend herself: "I did not seek it for us, Mr. Griffin, only for the Haldols, so that —" She broke off. — *so that I wouldn't be sickened by seeing the vermin crawl on them, sickened near to madness by the feel of them on me* was what was true. She had gone looking for technology for her own sake, then. She could not lie. That sin was even worse. She stared at the ground between her feet. "I'm sorry, Mr. Griffin."

He turned, opened the door. "I think we'd better go inside, Mrs. Griffin." Numbly, she followed him into the cabin. He closed the door behind them. The sound of the bar thudding home was dreadfully final. Jonah might have heard that sound when the jaws of the whale closed on him.

"Please, Mr. Griffin—," Victoria began. He hit her then. Whatever she'd been about to say was lost in pain. He hit her again, and again. She cowered and endured it as best she could. At first, he was dispassionate about the beating, as if he were simply training an animal to do what he required.

But soon he began to breathe hard. The blows he rained on her grew harder and less calculated. "Whoring with the Whore of Babylon," he panted. "I'll teach you about whoring. See if I don't!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and hurled her to the ground. One of her outflung arms slammed

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against a footstool, sent it spinning away.

He threw himself atop her. Even then, she did not understand what he was all about until he jerked her dress up toward her waist. "No, Mr. Griffin," she exclaimed. "Not in the daylight!"

"Shut up, whore!" He backhanded her. Clumsily, one-handed, he unbuttoned his overalls, yanked them down. She shut her eyes tight so she would not have to see the swollen organ that slapped against the inside of her thigh.

He always took her roughly. But for the fact that she was down on the floor instead of in their bed, this was hardly different from any other time. But he did it now to punish her further, not to join them as man and wife. She knew that — how well she knew it. But somehow, even though she knew it, his harsh thrusts made her body kindle, transmuting pain to pleasure.

She opened her eyes. His were closed, his face but a couple of inches from her own. Before her pleasure mounted to a peak — too soon, as usual — he turned red and grunted like a pig. Then he abruptly pulled himself out of her. She did not want to be empty of him, not yet. But he rolled away, rearranged his overalls. "Cover yourself," he growled.

"Yes, Mr. Griffin." She tugged at her dress until it went decently down to her ankles once more. She watched her husband warily as she got to her feet, fearful he wanted to beat her again.

But he seemed sated. He stayed on the floor longer than she had. When he did get up, all he said was, "Fix me some supper."

"Yes, Mr. Griffin," Victoria said again. She went back into the kitchen. The places where he had hit her ached at every step. Only a small part of her minded the pain, the animal part concerned solely with bodily well-being. She knew she deserved what he'd given her.

The animal part of her also still wished he'd stayed atop her another minute longer. Her cheeks and ears heated in shame as she took out an onion and began to slice it. He hadn't intended her to enjoy his body; he'd intended to humiliate her with it. And he had — but the humiliation itself was sweet. It almost tempted her to sin again, so that she might be chastised. . . .

"Get thee behind me, Satan," she whispered as she reached for the loaf of bread on the counter. She threw away the stale slice at the end. That waste of food was in its own way also sinful, but she wanted supper to be

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as fine as it could, to show Mr. Griffin she truly was contrite.

Her husband was in his own way a fair man, and not one to hold a grudge —and perhaps that splendid supper did help mollify him. He read Scripture to her afterward. And he spoke no more of her trip to the Federation research base. Their life together healed along with her bruises.

Two weeks after the day he beat and raped her, her courses failed to come. When she was certain what that meant, she got down on her knees and praised the Lord: "Truly all things work together for good."

THEY NAMED the baby Lavinia, after Mr. Griffin's mother, who was in Heaven. She was a fussy child, and squawked for Victoria's breast at all hours of the day and night. Between the baby and everything else she still had to do, Victoria stumbled about in a gray haze of fatigue. But Lavinia flourished, which made up for any amount of exhaustion.

When Lavinia was asleep during the day, Victoria would sometimes steal a moment to stand by the cradle and look down at her. Part of that was the normal pride any mother knew, part the extra concern of a mother who'd already lost one child. And part was the urgent need she felt to kept the vermin away from her baby.

Every so often, one of the round, revolting little bugs crawled out from under Lavinia's swaddling and walked across her smooth cheek or through her thin, fine light-brown hair. Then Victoria's hand would swoop down like a stooping hawk, nab the pest, and crush it between the nails of thumb and forefinger. A couple of times, after she'd killed two or three vermin in the space of a couple of minutes, she cried because it was her daughter's blood that stained her hand.

She also found and destroyed a great many biting pinheads while she was changing the baby's soiled linen: that only made a revolting task more so. The vermin seemed especially fond of Lavinia's most tender places. Victoria wished she did not have to touch her in those parts, but had no choice. Once she satisfied herself no vermin remained on the baby, she would avert her eyes from what her hands were doing.

The pests also seemed drawn to her breasts. In the moments before she dropped the privacy shawl over Lavinia and her bosom, she would flick away vermin one by one. Whatever she did was never enough. The bugs kept biting her, and kept biting Lavinia, too.

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She laughed at the promise she'd got from the Federation research base, the promise to eliminate the vermin, and with them the settlements of the Church of the Holy Mission. The vaunted technology that had seduced so much of humankind must have stumbled here, when confronting the true elite of God. Progress in the material world was a snare and a delusion, anyhow. Where were Babylon, Rome, New York? Gone, gone, gone.

Victoria was tempted to go back to the research base and tell Janice just that, throw it in her face. Whenever she thought about leaving the baby with a friend for a day and making that long walk, she felt a curious stirring in her private parts. That was a temptation, too, but one she managed to resist. She conceived again, but miscarried, which slowed her down for half a year.

The baby grew. She began to walk, to talk, to lisp her first hymns. She got into everything, came home covered in every kind of filth. Victoria washed Lavinia far more often than she washed herself. She always used the baths as an occasion to get rid of as many vermin on her daughter as she could. By the time Lavinia turned three, Victoria found fewer of them than she had before. By the time Lavinia was four, the blood-filled pinheads were almost gone. Victoria noticed she wasn't getting bitten so often herself, either. She did not know whether to rejoice or be afraid.

When in doubt, she found out what her husband thought. "Fewer vermin lately, seems to me," she said one evening after Lavinia had gone to sleep. She spoke cautiously, lest he remember how that might have come to pass.

Mr. Griffin grunted. He was tired from another in the endless string of days out in the fields. "Can't say I miss 'em," he answered, and let it go at that. Victoria had been sitting at the edge of her chair, stiff with tension. She relaxed — not that the hard chair permitted much relaxation. Her husband had truly forgiven her long-ago transgression, then.

The glow of relief sustained her only a couple of days. It turned to dread when Lavinia, trying to be helpful, knocked over the water jar and smashed it. Victoria gave the child a sound switching and sent her to bed without supper, but that did not bring back the water jar. She would have to go to the Haldol village and dicker for another one.

She prepared for the ordeal as best she could. She cooked double the next day, so she would only have to reheat the stew the day after that: God willing, Mr. Griffin would find no excuse to set hands on her. She arranged

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for her neighbor to take care of Lavinia. None of that, though, kept the real panic, the panic that sprang from having to witness Haldol depravity, from making her heart pound and race.

When she finally got to the village, it was as bad as she remembered. In fact, it was worse. Two Haldols were mating in the middle of the street as she came up. They paid no attention to her; the rest of the Haldols paid no attention to them. They found the arrival of a *pisquaa*, a human, far more diverting.

"Pot? Water jar?" one of them said in his squeakily accented smattering of English. "We have pot, water jar, God bless you. What you have, *pisquaa*?"

The haggling started there. Victoria was glad to focus on the noisy Haldol potters rather than the lazily copulating couple behind them. Round Haldol eyes stared back at her from round Haldol faces. The red, rough patches on the sides of the males' necks still reminded her of meat that had gone over.

But the vermin were gone! Not a single biting pinhead crawled across smooth, slimy Haldol skin. The Haldols themselves took no special notice of that, but then, they had never seemed to mind the vermin anyhow. Victoria minded them. Not having to look at them wandering over Haldol bodies, not having to feel their tiny legs on her own flesh and in her hair, left her so relieved that she almost managed not to think about the open lewdness constantly on display in the village.

One by one the potters picked up their jugs and carried them away. At last, Victoria was quietly bargaining with a single male, each of them sure goods would change hands, each intent they should do so on the best possible terms. Quietly bargaining . . . no sooner had the phrase crossed Victoria's mind than she looked up (no risk to her sensibilities now, for the mating couple had long since finished). One of the reasons the Haldol village was quieter than she remembered from her last visit was that fewer immature Haldols were about, and no little yellow toddlers that she could see.

"Where are all the children?" she asked the Haldol potter, who could use her language fairly well. "Are they out in the forest today for some reason?"

The Haldol stuck out his tongue, a gesture of uncertainty. "Not so many childs, *pisquaa*. Few borns. Think maybe forest gods angry. Plenty pray them, plenty —" He pumped his arm in an obscene gesture that made

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Victoria blush. "But females, they no get childs."

"Your gods are false," Victoria said. "Surely Jesus would hear your prayers. The true God had His only-begotten Son that mankind might live forever. Accept Him, and He will help you — you are His creatures, too."

Members of the Holy Mission Church had been preaching the Gospel to the Haldols since the day they landed on Reverence. Ever since that day, the Haldols had ignored them or, worse, laughed at them: all they'd taken was the *God bless you* that larded their speech. But now the potter stuck out his tongue and said, "Maybe we talk to this God of yours. Ours not hear."

Exaltation filled Victoria's body. It was sweeter than beet sugar, sweeter than anything she'd known save the spasm of her flesh when, as occasionally did happen, Mr. Griffin mounted her long enough to take her out of herself. She bit the inside of her lip, hard, at having the temerity to compare the carnal to His infusion of divine joy.

She gave the potter an extra knife blade, above and beyond the price they'd finally settled on. "God bless you, you *pisquaa* really crazy," he said. She did not care. Had he been only a little less repellent to her, she would have kissed him.

Even her husband said, "If they truly do come over to Christ, you have done well, Mrs. Griffin." That made her hold her head proud and high, until she remembered vanity was also sinful. She hoped Mr. Griffin would choose that night to lie with her. When they were in bed, she even went so far as to brush her thigh against his, as if by accident, shamefully forward though that was. But he was already asleep. The day had been long. She soon joined him in slumber.

Victoria was used to getting up at dawn. From sun to sun never seemed time enough to get through a day's chores. But she was not used to being blasted out of bed by a horn that sounded as if Satan himself would wind it come Judgment Day. "That's technology," Mr. Griffin shouted, trying to make himself heard above the hellish din. "What are the damned Federation people playing at, using their accursed technology here?"

Victoria did not answer. Lavinia was screaming in terror from the next room. Victoria ran to comfort her daughter, who cried, "Make it stop, Mommy! Make the bad noise stop!" But Victoria could not make the bad noise stop.

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In fact, the noise got worse, for it turned to bellowed words, and terrifying words: "Victoria Griffin! Where are you, Victoria Griffin? Come out!"

From the other bedroom, Mr. Griffin yelled, "Don't you go, Mrs. Griffin! I'll fetch the ax to protect you."

All at once, Victoria felt a warm burst of affection for her husband. She also felt fear for him — what could an ax do against the demonic dangers of technology?

"We need to talk with you, Victoria Griffin," the impossibly loud voice went on. "No harm will come to you; you have our promise."

"Don't believe them, Mrs. Griffin," Mr. Griffin said. "Those from outside the church are by nature liars and cheats."

Now that the horn was no longer blaring, Victoria found she could think again, after a fashion. She said, "Let me go out, Mr. Griffin. How can they have any reason to wish me harm? And even if they should, well, as a martyr for the faith, I will sit at the right hand of God and His Son. And besides," she added, slipping from the spiritual to the purely pragmatic, "if I talk with them, maybe they'll quit roaring."

Her sudden switch jerked a startled chuckle from her husband. "All right, Mrs. Griffin. God go with you."

"God go with you, Mommy," Lavinia echoed as Victoria walked out of her room and went to the front door. Despite her brave words, her legs were fear-light, ready to turn and bolt the instant her will released them. She took a deep, determined breath and kept walking.

Several men and women of New Zion were already out-of-doors, staring in disbelief and horror at the smoothly curved metal device that floated a couple of feet above the grass of the village square, and at the wantonly dressed man and woman sitting inside the device. Cornelia Baker's avidly curious glance flicked from the flying machine to Victoria and back again. Victoria looked away, sick at heart. Cornelia would never let her live down such scandal.

She decided the quickest way to be rid of the scientists (even thinking such a filthy word made her lips purse in dismay) would be to let them have their say. She forced herself to take a step toward the flier. "Here I am."

"That's her, all right." Victoria recognized Janice more by voice than by face. Janice jumped down from the flying machine. Even Cornelia Baker gasped at the sight of her uncovered legs. Several New Zion doors slammed

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shut as the folk who lived in those cabins protected themselves from the shocking spectacle.

Janice strode toward Victoria. "I ought to knock your stupid, hymn-singing teeth down your throat, you stinking Churchie," she snarled.

Victoria stared at her. "How have I offended you? How could I have offended you, when we've not so much as seen each other these past five years?"

"You didn't do much then, either, did you?" Janice said bitterly. "All you did was set in motion the extinction of a whole intelligent species."

"What? The vermin?" Victoria said. "You *are* mad."

"Not the vermin — the Haldols. There won't be any more Haldols after the last of this generation dies, and it's all your fault."

"All I wanted to do was to get rid of the vermin, so the Haldols wouldn't suffer so much from them." *And so they wouldn't crawl on me,* Victoria thought, recalling too well the feel of tiny legs moving through her body hair, of needle-like mouthparts jabbing through her skin to suck her blood.

"So you asked us, and we did it. We took care of the bugs, all right— turn three tailored retroviruses loose on them at once, and they go, go fast. Trouble was, we moved too fast. I'm going to hate myself every day of the rest of my life for that, and I'm not the only one. When the Haldols stopped having little Haldols, we tried to find out why. Turns out the vermin aren't just vermin — the Haldols need them to reproduce."

"That's the most disgusting thing I ever heard," Victoria said with a shudder. "Besides, how could it be true? To my shame, I've seen what the Haldols do. It's not —" Hot blood rose from her throat to the crown of her head, but she made herself go on, though her voice fell to a whisper: "It's not that different from what passes between men and women."

"It doesn't *look* that different," Janice corrected her. "But male Haldols don't put sperm into females when they fuck; they —"

"When they what?" Victoria broke in.

Janice clapped a hand to her forehead. "Churchies! When they mate, I mean. Anyway, they don't put sperm in. They just prime the females' — organs. Is that all right? Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

"Yes. Go on," Victoria said. The sooner this was over, the better.

"I am." Janice glared at her. She still didn't understand what she'd done wrong. The woman from the research base continued, "They prime them; they make them secrete a mucus loaded with pheromones that — Why am

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I bothering? Anyway, then the vermin that have been wandering over their bodies, the vermin that have picked up sperm from the males' throat patches, those vermin go inside to feed on the mucus and incidentally to put the sperm where they'll do the most good."

Victoria remembered watching vermin crawl into the female Haldol's private parts after she was done mating, remembered how sick the sight had made her. Now, knowing why they did it, she felt even sicker. She said, "You're telling me that without the vermin —"

"No more baby Haldols, not ever again. That's right, Churchie. How do you like being responsible for wiping out a whole race?"

The weight of the accusation was crushing, a weight like the one Jesus had accepted when He assumed the burden of mankind's sins. But He was the Son of God, Victoria a mere human being. *I didn't mean it*, she thought. That wasn't good enough. She tried, "You're the ones who killed the vermin, not me." That wasn't good enough, either; she knew it the moment the words passed her lips.

"We never would have done it if you hadn't suggested it," Janice said.

The coldness in her voice brought back to Victoria how cold it had been inside the research base; it was the only time in her life, save after an infrequent bath, that she hadn't been filmed with sticky sweat (and, she recalled, Janice had said something rude about how often, or rather, how seldom, she bathed). Thinking of that unnatural chill helped her remember what had gone on in there, remember it with almost word-for-word clarity, as if it had happened yesterday, not five years before. She said, "You didn't get rid of the vermin to do New Zion and the Church of the Holy Mission a favor. You did it for the Haldols — you thought your lying evolution would make them prevail over us. I told you then that the Lord would provide. Now I see that He has," She dropped to her knees and clasped her hands so she could properly thank God for His blessing.

Deep in her throat, Janice made a noise that would have seemed better suited to the killing beasts that haunted the jungles of Reverence. "Better it would have been you," she ground out. "You deserve to be extinct. We're going to try to figure out a way to keep the Haldols going without their vermin, but God — and I don't mean yours — only knows if we'll be able to do it before all their females get too old to breed. With a research budget that just about keeps us in paper clips, it won't be easy."

"I will pray for you and the Haldols both, you for delivery from your false

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idol of technology, and them for being delivered from the affliction it has brought." Victoria shut her eyes to do just that. She slid into the near-trance state that marked true communion with God. In it, she was only dimly aware of Janice stomping away, of the aircar *whooshing* out of New Zion, of the gasps from some of the more impressionable folk there at the sight of that marvel.

When at last she came back to herself, Cornelia Baker was standing in front of her. The other woman helped her to her feet, brushed at her dress to get out the mark of the dirt in which she'd knelt. "You drove them away, Victoria," Cornelia said. "However did you do that?"

It was, Victoria thought, the first time in her life that she'd succeeded in impressing Cornelia Baker. "I told them the Lord's truth, Cornelia," she answered proudly.

"Was she — the slut, I mean — was she talking with you about the

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Haldols — their — their —" Cornelia Baker was the boldest woman in New Zion. Not even she could make herself discuss prurient matters straight on.

Victoria understood her well enough. "Her name is Janice. Yes, we talked about that." What the Haldols did, she thought, was so vile it made the way of man and woman, squalid as that was, seem perfection and purity beside it. "She says they'll probably die out after this generation and leave the whole world of Reverence to us."

"Oh." Cornelia thought about that. "Where will we get our pots, then?"

"It won't happen tomorrow," Victoria assured her. "Our great-grandparents knew how. I expect we'll have time to learn again. It's just what I told Janice — the Lord will provide. He always has."

Cornelia Baker nodded confidently. "Amen," she said.

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Coming Attractions

APRIL PROMISES to be a wild issue. **James Lawson** provides our cover story, "Gagrito," another of his Montezuma Strip Stories. The story begins with a quirky, bloody coup in a pet store, and proceeds from there.

Michael F. Flynn makes his first appearance in *F&SF* with one of the oddest time travel tales every written. "Timothy Leary, Batu Kahn, and the Palimpsest of Universal Reality" not only takes the prize for title of the year, it manages to live up to the title's bizarre promise.

Ron Goulart returns to these pages with "Fear of Success," a fantasy story in which a writer walks into strange circumstances and — well, it's a Ron Goulart story: impossible to describe and a joy to read.

Lest you thing the entire issue is filled with oddball humor and strange titles, let me reassure those of you who like only the well written *serious* tale. Well known mystery writer **Ed Gorman** makes his first appearance in *F&SF* with a frightening Civil War horror story called "The Face."

In future issues, **Esther M. Friesner** returns with vicious humor. **Bridget McKenna's** story, "The Little Things," provides the basis for another Thomas Canty cover. **Barry Malzberg, Patricia Matthews,** and **Kit Reed** will all contribute marvelous short stories, as will **Maureen F. McHugh,** whose novel *China Mountain Zhang* was reviewed by John Kessel in this issue. Popular sf writer **Alan Steele** makes his first appearance in *F&SF* along with favorite **Grania Davis.** From short novels to short-shorts, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* will provide some of the most entertaining reading you'll find all year.

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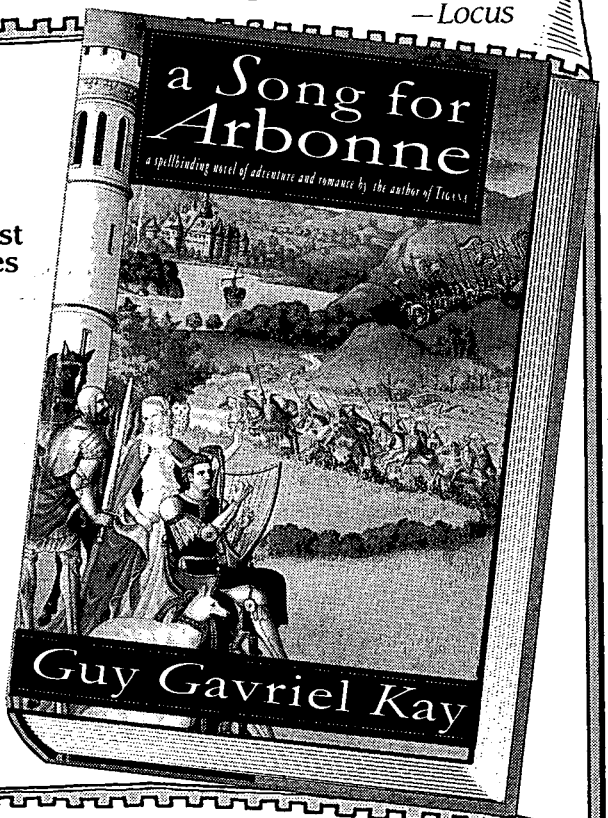

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Magnus knew quite well that Rod Gallowglass had stayed on Gramarye because he had fallen in love with Magnus's mother. He knew it not just from his parents' report, but from several others of the older generation who had witnessed it—including Fess. And anything the children had done had been incidental. Until now.

—Excerpted from *A Wizard in Absentia*

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